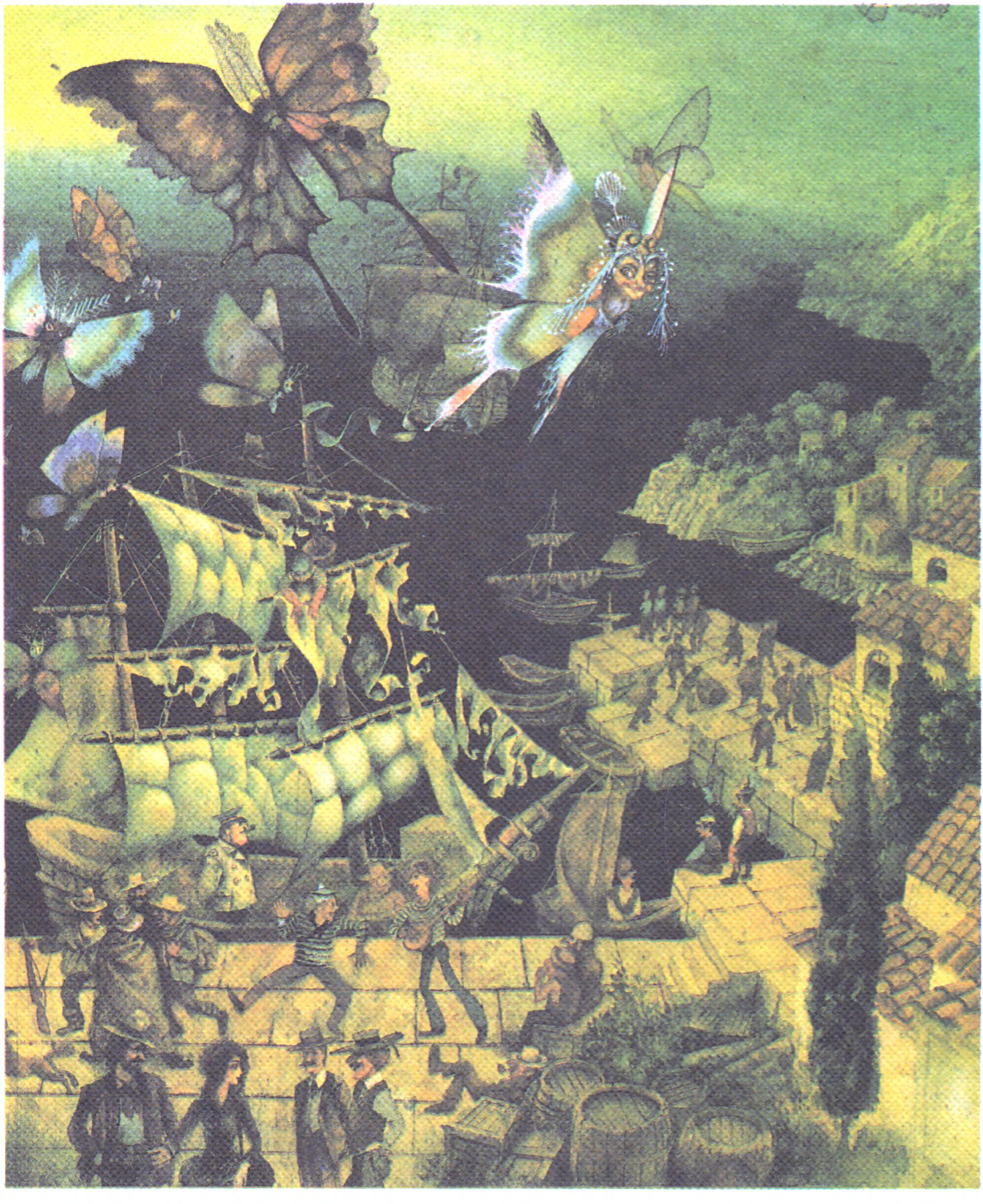

ADVENTURES ON CAPTAINS' ISLAND

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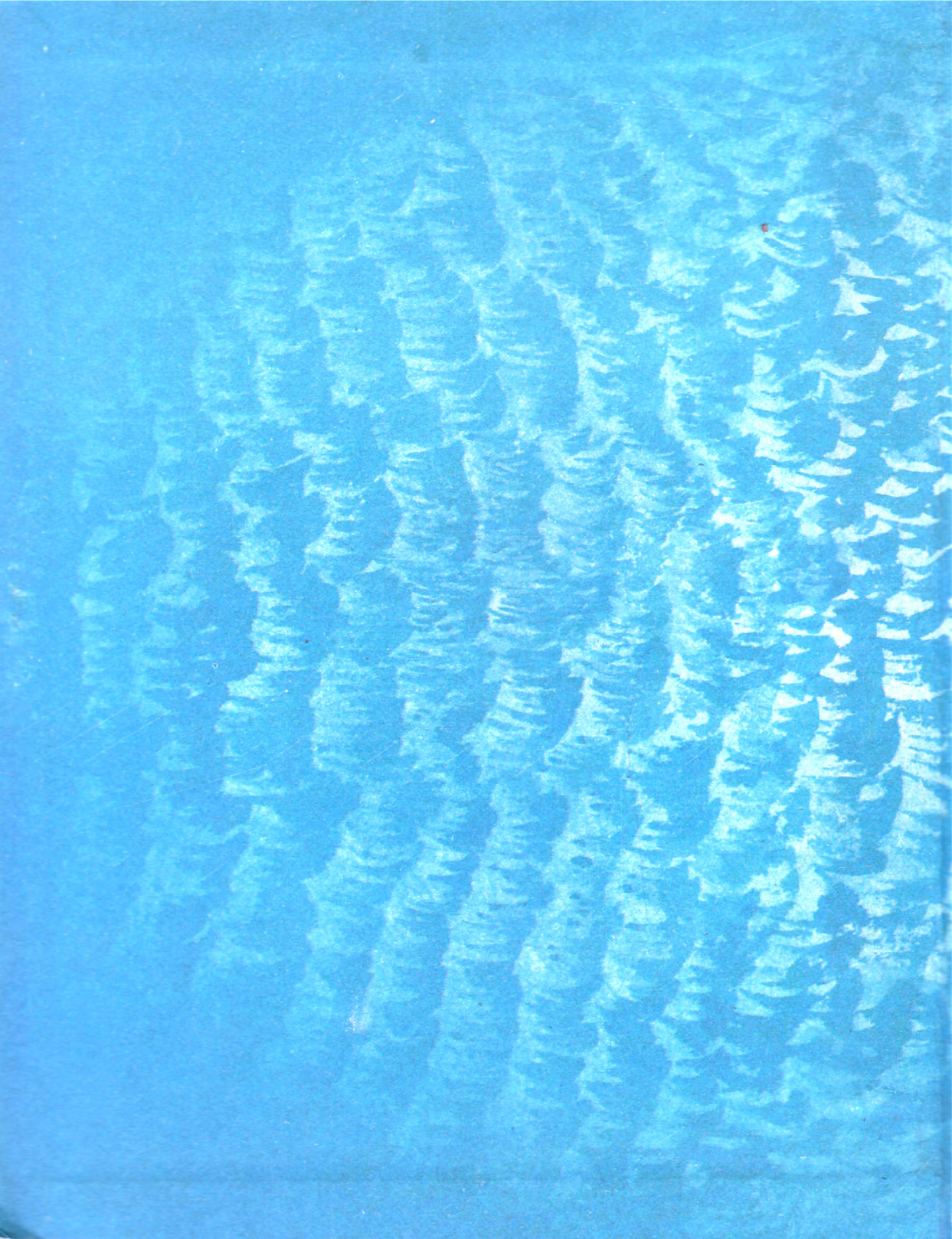

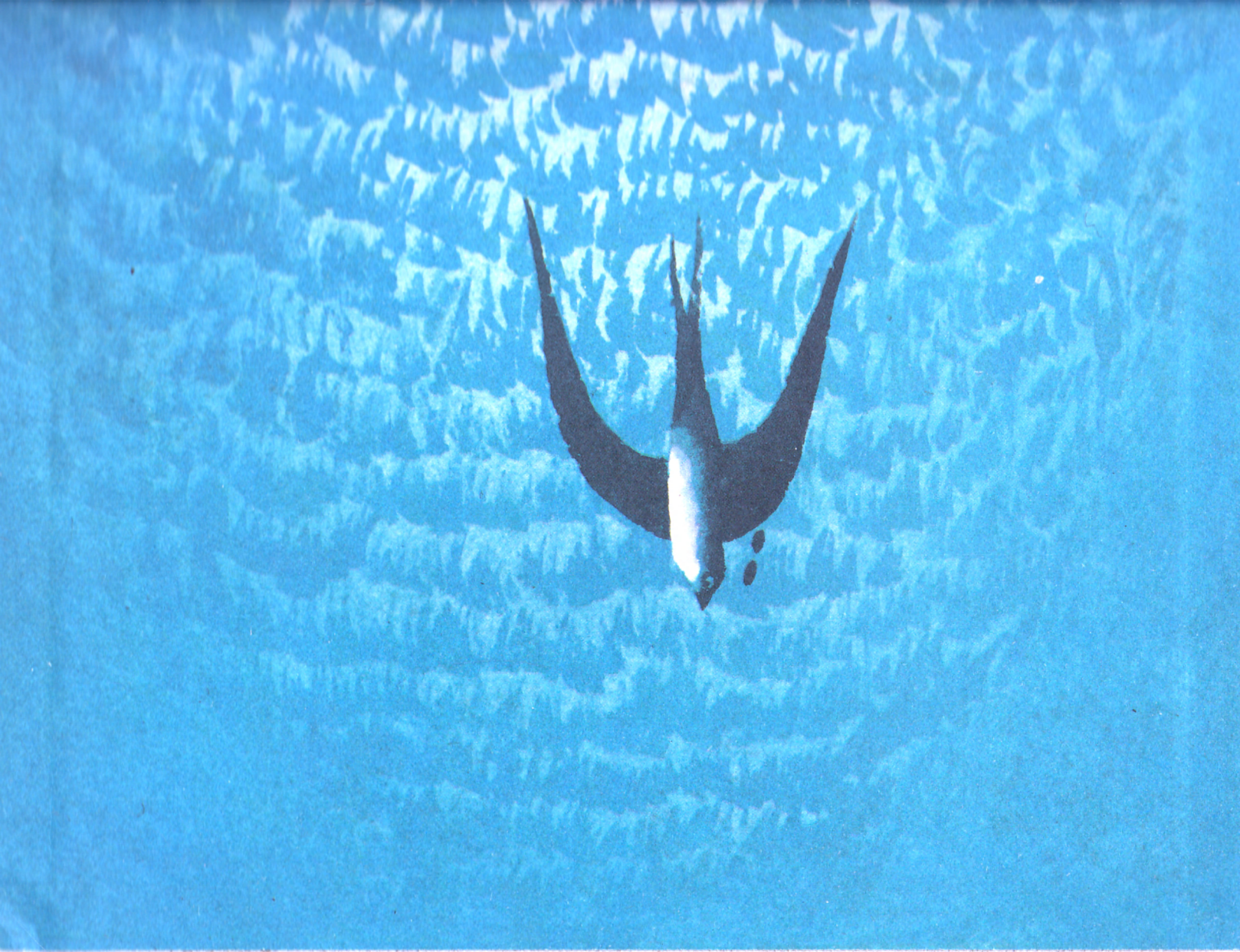

Sofia Prokofieva

ADVENTURES ON CAPTAINS' ISLAND

A Fairy Tale

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Translated from the Russian by *James Riordan*
Edited by *Graham Whittaker*

Raduga Publishers
Moscow

С. Прокофьева

ОСТРОВ КАПИТАНОВ

На английском языке

© Издательство «Детская литература», 1981 г.
English translation © Raduga Publishers 1987.
Illustrated

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

П $\frac{4803010102—477}{031(01)—87}$ 039—86

ISBN 5-05-000673-2

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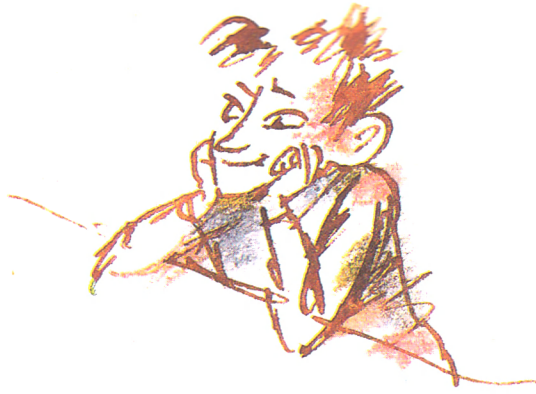


Chapter I

The Pinewood Boat and More: an Amazing Acquaintance

Spring that year was slow in coming, and Val was fed up with waiting.

As he gazed at the unflurried fall of snow, its podgy snowflakes drifting silently past his window, Val set to work making a little boat from a dry block of pinewood.

Every evening he patiently whittled away with his stubby penknife. He stuck on doughty sails to the trim masts; he made shrouds from tough twine: fine but unbreakable.

And when he finished the job, he painted in blue on the side: DREAM. That's what he had decided to call it.

The boat turned out a treat, the best there was. Just like the real thing. Especially in the dark before Mother turned on the light.

Twilight poured into the room in flickering waves, filling it so that the walls seemed to melt away, vanish altogether. And then it seemed that *Dream* had weighed anchor and was floating on those dark, slender waves of light with a breeze of distant climes filling out her sails.

Dream's sails would gleam feebly as the dusk deepened, but the gloom would steadily enfold them as if the boat was sailing off into the far beyond...

'The good ship *Dream* is a magnificent vessel, sturdy and grand', Val would muse in those precious minutes. 'No storm or fatal ninth wave would daunt such a ship. And *Dream*'s captain is a real sailor. I know him. And so I should! He's just like... Well, never mind. The main thing's that he's brave, as bold as brass. And he won't stand no nonsense, he's no chatterbox like Petka from Form A. He's all suntanned like... Well, let's say like a certain person when he returned from holidays in the Crimea. Our captain is tired, of course. His eyes are blinking from lack of sleep, yet he firmly sets course by an old sea map...'

Val would never have admitted it, but in his heart of hearts he was thinking — no, he was dead sure — that the bold and daring captain was none other than him, Valentine, as his mother liked to call him.

'The wind should blow up by nightfall,' Val thought to himself, scowling as hard as he could. 'It isn't just foul weather — it's force ten at least; we've underwater reefs ahead. Anyway, it isn't the first time we've rounded this horn...'

You'd think the boat was doomed for Davy Jones's locker. Spread your feet wider, firmer, sailor lad. An enormous wave hung menacingly above *Dream*, gleaming within, sinister and green... Swirling sea spray was already beating upon his face...

'Valentine! Supper and bed, d'you hear, bed,' came his mother's cheery, homely voice from the kitchen.

'Drat!' Val exclaimed, taking a deep breath. His heart was beating fast, his ears were ringing.

There was nothing for it, of course; he had to be patient and wait... But his time would come soon. Val would grow up and become a captain. No doubt about that.

And once the snow had cleared, he'd take Alyonka from 1B to launch *Dream* in the gurgling ice-cold stream, jingling and jangling in the shallows.

True, Alyonka had just lost her two front teeth. But even without her two front teeth Alyonka was still the best of all the girls in class. And to tell you the honest truth, Val thought she was the very best in their street and even in the whole wide world, because... Well, just because. And that was that.

There again, he could even present Alyonka with his wonderful little boat, saying unconcernedly,

'Take it if you like, for keeps. I don't need it, not in the slightest... I can make another if I want...'

At last spring did arrive after all. The snowdrifts shrunk and slunk away. All around water was on the move, shimmering, tinkling. The nasty brooks started rolling down the steep lane towards the river.

'Now's the time,' decided Val.

The day was sunny yet still chilly. The sun was shining, that's true, but through the winter it had lost the knack of warming things.

Val's mittens became wet through straightaway and he stuck them in his pocket. The nasty damp from wet mittens soon seeped through his coat and trousers right to his skin.

Val launched *Dream* into a fast transparent stream. The melted waters snatched up the little boat along with tiny icefloes and bore it off. The wind at once blew out the sails, taut and strained.

The boat sailed along swiftly, just slightly bobbing and dipping on a wave at the edge of the stream, jauntily rounding the water-washed bright stones and lumps of brick.

Now she was cleverly avoiding a whirlpool where some helpless twigs and a soaked matchbox were bumping and twirling.

All of a sudden Val thought he caught a glimpse of Alyonka's blue knitted bonnet behind the still bare bushes with their tiny clusters of buds.

'Alyonka, Alyonka, come over here,' Val yelled.

But it was not Alyonka's bonnet at all; it was someone's blue shirt hanging on a washing line. And that shirt, instead of drying in the sunshine, was billowing up, its blue sleeves raised up, as if eager to fly away.

When Val turned his attention back to the boat, she was well away. Her white sails, dipping and reappearing, were now visible somewhere down below, at the other end of the street.

Val tore off in pursuit. His feet flew over the soggy ground where grey crusts of melting snow still lay in shady folds and ruts.

The stream had formed a whole sea at the end of the street. And right in the centre of the sea a half-submerged garden bench protruded from the water. Alongside was a waterfilled urn, with two round pigeons sitting on the stone rim. Their smooth necks were shot with silver. Glancing about them all the time, the pigeons were greedily drinking water as if afraid it would not last.

Val was hoping that his boat had caught on something. But she hadn't. She had already passed by the stone urn and bench.

She had gaily sailed on farther and farther. As if overjoyed at her sudden freedom. As if hurrying off somewhere.

Then the stream narrowed once more, began to seethe, turned white and rushed down towards the river in a foaming waterfall.

The white sails gleamed for the last time and the boat vanished from view.

That was it.

Tears blinded Val. He clenched his fists in impotent despair and, unable to restrain himself, he took a deep breath and let out a loud wail.

'Hey, come on, come on, Valentine,' came a soft, soothing voice. 'Bawling like this! Enough... Well, come on now...'

Someone gently pulled Val to himself and covered his head with the flap of a wide raincoat.

Chapter 2

Alex Secretman and More: a Map of the Fairy Tale Ocean

Val found himself in darkness.

The tight silk lining of the wide raincoat rustled pleasantly.

'There's no need for that,' the selfsame voice went on. 'We may say you're already a grown man, a first former, a seven-year old. What's more... Oh, what a nuisance. Only don't poke your head out. Here's Miss Helen heading our way. We'd better dodge out of sight before it's too late. Otherwise, I fear, she'd recognise you by your trousers and boots. There's no sense her seeing you all upset, with a red nose...'

Pressing close to the stranger's warm side, Val obediently took a few steps.

In his surprise he quite lost his head. He had not the faintest idea what was going on.

'Who on earth's Miss Helen?' he asked in a voice that wasn't his, wheezy, as if full of a cold. His throat had gone dry and he cleared it cautiously.

'Who, you ask?' said the stranger in surprise. 'The very one. Your

pal Alyonka from Form 1B. You know, the one you wanted to give *Dream* to.'

Val felt like saying he had intended to give *Dream* to Alyonka, certainly not to some Miss Helen from whom they even had to hide, goodness knows why. But he held his tongue.

He drew back the edge of the raincoat and peered up.

The raincoat's owner was not an old man at all, in fact, quite a young fellow. Rather a skinny bloke, with a long face, bespectacled.

The main thing wasn't that though, not that at all.

The stranger had unusual, quite amazing eyes. Val noticed them straight off. His eyes were warm. Not only that — they radiated heat! Even through the glasses.

Would you believe it! 'Pon my honour. One of Val's cheeks and an eye warmed up immediately. And his fingers holding up the raincoat edge also became warm.

'That's all fine and dandy, but let's go to my place, Valentine,' said the strange fellow anxiously. 'First of all, your feet are wet through, and second, those wet mittens in the right pocket of your coat... No, no, I wouldn't advise you to go home in that state, speaking frankly.'

Val didn't try to argue. It really was too risky going home now. The fact was that Mother flew off the handle every time he came home with wet feet; you'd have thought soaking boots and mittens were a mother's mortal enemies.

So the pair of them set off down the street. To make walking easier, Val clung closer to the stranger, and the man pressed his shoulders firmly and tenderly.

The stiff silk lining of the raincoat rustled pleasantly. And in the raincoat pocket, right next to Val's ear, something rattled drily, as if shells and tiny pebbles were rubbing against one another.

Once inside the lift the stranger finally let Val out from under the raincoat.

They took a good look at each other, and both felt somehow awkward.

'Alexei Secretman,' said the strange fellow, extending a long, spindly hand to Val. 'You can call me simply Alex, if you like.'

Val shook Alexei Secretman's hand stiffly, for the simple reason that, to tell the truth, first-formers do not often have to shake hands with grown-ups.

'And I shall call you Valentine,' said Alexei Secretman. He screwed up his eyes and quietly smacked his lips as if he had just popped a boiled sweet into his mouth. 'That, if I'm not mistaken, is what your mother calls you.'

'He knows all about me. But how?' thought Val to himself with some anxiety, and then at once consoled himself with the thought that the man had likely as not been to their house. 'While I was asleep. That's typical of Mum and Dad, when someone interesting comes they always pack me off to bed posthaste. Yet if a neighbour puts in an appearance, say Auntie Klava, I just have to sit tight and listen. How well I know that chatter: "Why are you so pale? Not getting enough fresh air?" Or: "I don't suppose you're doing well at school, are you? Out in the streets all the time". Will they never tire of such nonsense?'

In the meantime the lift had shuddered to a halt. Val went out and looked about him. The staircase was common enough, new, exactly the same as in his own apartment block. And it had the same oily paint smell as well.

Yet it seemed to Val that Alex did not open the door with a key, he just leaned forward and whispered something into the keyhole. The door responded with a merry sparrow twittering and obediently opened up by itself.

The room into which Val stepped looked as if it was inhabited by books, not by Alex. They were simply everywhere: on the table, on the chairs and even on the settee.

'What funny books,' Val thought, 'big, old, in dark binding. They're probably a hundred years old, or maybe a thousand. Only how on earth does Alex sleep on that settee? Crammed with books, it must be

uncomfortable; on top of them it's hard; but perhaps he takes them off for the night and stacks them somewhere?'

But where could he put them? As it was, the floor was piled high with books.

One wall of the room was hung to the ceiling with children's drawings. Some were framed, others simply stuck with drawing pins. Best of all Val liked the little girl with three big blue eyes. Two eyes were happy, the third was sad.

Alex took off his bulky raincoat and rubbed his hands.

'Now, first things first — tea. Hot tea. What do you think? Ah, no question about it.'

He stood Val's sodden boots on the radiator to dry, and hung the mittens alongside.

Then he shifted some books, freeing the edge of a chair and the tip of the table. All at once tea appeared, very hot and very sweet. And big soft slippers appeared on Val's feet, so warm you'd have thought a kitten had just been sleeping in each of them.

Alex settled opposite him, putting his bony elbows on the table.

Val was soon warm and cosy. He was even glad things had turned out like this: othewise how would he have met Alex?

'That's grand,' breathed Alex, nodding and happy about something. 'You see, my dear lad, my dear Valentine, even in the remotest olden days, in all corners of the world, young lads have been launching boats. And of course, often enough those boats sailed away from them. That's how it goes. Ah but, never regret the passing of a boat. I beg of you. Never be sorry!'

Alex suddenly leant towards Val and muttered under his breath.

'Now here's yet another amazing, near incomprehensible business. For some reason those who launch boats very often become captains themselves. Astonishing, isn't it? But that's precisely how it is.'

Alex fell silent and sat back sharply on his chair. He stared fixedly and severely at Val. It was as if he was intent on making sure Val realised the whole importance, the whole significance of what he had just disclosed.

Val gave no answer, just blinked several times diligently.

'The main thing is being able to dream, being able to dream properly... Ah now, that's a special gift,' muttered Alex softly, as if to himself.

'And am I able to dream or not?' thought Val with sudden fright. 'I don't even know.'

Thereupon Alex smiled kindly to Val. And his smile seemed to praise Val for something.

'Tell me, have you never given thought to where all those little boats made by children's hands go? Where they're bound for?' asked Alex.

'I've never thought,' muttered Val.

'I suppose you thought they were sailing off somewhere on the crest of the wave, without sail or helm?'

All of a sudden Alex cheered up, let out a loud guffaw and clapped his hands on his knees.

'No, my dear lad, no, no, no! For your information, all those little boats are sailing to the one and only cherished goal. To Captains' Island. That's where they're going. To a wonderful island washed on all sides by the deep blue Fairy Tale Ocean. And brave little captains of children's dreams step onto the decks of those ships. Ah, how many exceedingly noble, lofty deeds do they perform in the name of justice, courage and dreams!'

Val's mouth dropped open in surprise. To Captains' Island? His boat too? Val was bursting to put a hundred questions to Alex all at once.

Yet just then Alex jumped up from his chair, waved his long arms about as if trying to fly up to the ceiling, and exclaimed noisily:

'What an absent-minded fellow I am, to be sure! What we have to do is draw the map of the Fairy Tale Ocean. Otherwise how on earth can your *Dream* reach Captains' Island?'

Thereupon the old books had to make room for a piece of paper planted upon the table. Alex also had paints and coloured pencils at hand.

A heavy book all but tumbled on to the floor, but Val just caught it in time. And although he was a mere first-former, he was still able to read what was inscribed in ancient, half-worn letters on the cover:

'Magic Encyclopaedia. Volume 8' — that was what he read and he froze on the spot with the heavy book slipping down from his hands.

Alex however took the book and carried it to the settee where a few more such books lay, their gold letters glittering importantly and mysteriously.

The two of them painted Captains' Island, a green island amid the deep blue ocean.

'There's a host of wonderful islands thereabout,' said Alex, admiring the map. 'Take just Hide-and-Seek Island or Lunch Break Archipelago. Carry on painting, go on. You do it much better than me. I shan't interrupt you.'

Val, his tongue poking out in concentration, was painting blue waves and multicoloured islands.

He dipped the brush into a bottle of ink and traced a wide band round the map. The map looked as if framed, and at once the deep blue ocean and milticoloured islands began to sparkle even more brightly in their paints.

Val was trying very hard, for all he was worth, yet all of a sudden... It's like that sometimes: all's going well when suddenly...

The ink bottle appeared somehow right alongside Val's elbow; you'd think it was on purpose, just leaping on the paper to spite him. And since he was engrossed in his work, Val of course did not notice it and went and nudged it...

The bottle overturned. A thick black blot, as black as a moonless night, marred the deep blue ocean.

'Alex, look at that!' howled Val in despair.

'It can't be helped, it can't be helped,' sighed Alex with a mournful shake of the head. He leant over the map, examining the ill-fated smudge. 'Yes, that's how it is. Alongside Captains' Island, slightly to the east, is Black Island. Rocky and unapproachable. Worst of all,

the warm current that rounds Captains' Island from the south bears all ships straight for Black Island. Especially at night it's so easy to stray off course in the dark.'

'But can't we remove it with a rubber or scrape it off with a razor-blade?' asked Val, gazing at Alex in hope and supplication.

Alex just shook his head sadly once more, adding:

'There's nothing to be done now. Anyway, why should we be down-hearted before need be? After all, danger, if you want to know, my dear Valentine, only enhances real courage.'

Alex pensively transferred his gaze to the window beyond which twilight was gathering in. Dusk had crept up on the town as if wishing to cover it in its enfolding black shroud. But the city was lifting those sombre waves with the bright heads of the first lamps.

Alex was gazing somewhere above the rooftops, into the depths of the darkened sky; he seemed to have forgotten about Val, about everything.

Val sat there in silence, quite still and quiet.

Then all at once Alex sighed, shook his head and turned to Val.

'Now the main thing is to deliver this map to the good ship *Dream*,' he said.

'But how?' asked Val.

Chapter 3

The Painted Swallow and More: Who Is Alex?

'You see,' Alex began. And Val was surprised to see he had blushed slightly. 'You see, my respected Valentine, I should have told you something at the start or, rather, explained. And I shall be very sorry if what you'll now learn will be to your distaste or seem peculiar.'

Alex stopped. He took off his glasses and started absent-mindedly to wipe the lenses with a crumpled check handkerchief. His eyes without the glasses seemed even brighter, as blue as blue could be. Warmth seemed to radiate from them in tangible waves and touch Val's face.

'Of course, in the age of technology, space conquest,' Alex went on, 'many reckon that I... Yet even so, one by no means contradicts the other, quite the contrary. Well now, let me be blunt since I am resolved to tell you. I... Only please, I beg of you, don't shout out and don't make surprised faces... You see, I'm a magician.'

Val caught his breath. He gave a lurch on his stool. It was a good job the stool was strong and four-square. You know how you get tottering three-legged stools. If you sit on such a three-legged stool, and you get a surprise, you find yourself ending up on the floor.

'Super,' muttered Val.

Alex's face suddenly brightened up. He smiled and relaxed as if Val's joy had communicated itself to him.

'Ah, if that's the case, splendid, splendid.'

Alex the Magician paced about the room, strumming his fingers on his lips, deep in thought.

'What can you and I come up with, what can we do? How can we get the map to our brig? Will we have to resort to my genie's services?'

'Genie?' exclaimed Val. He simply did not believe his ears.

'Why not?' said Alex, shrugging his shoulders and frowning slightly. 'Virtually all magicians have genies. That's perfectly natural. And I've one too.'

'A genie?'

'Of course.'

'A real genie?'

'Well, of course a real genie,' exclaimed Alex, no longer hiding his exasperation. 'We surely won't be sitting here until morning repeating one and the same thing? Yes, a genie. What's more a fine specimen, you know. From a most ancient and, one might say, mighty clan. Maybe we should summon him up for our tale, eh?'

'Why not? It wouldn't be a bad thing,' said Val, trying to appear calm and even indifferent.

But a little ball of curiosity seemed to be jumping about inside him. Val clamped his hands under the table. To see a genie! A real genie! Now that would be something to tell Alyonka.

'Yes, of course, on the one hand, it would be like...'

Alex was tugging at his ear absent-mindedly. It was clear something was bothering him.

'Of course, a fairy tale is his element. It wouldn't cost him anything to take the map to *Dream*. Anyway he's been sitting around twiddling his thumbs. Sick to the back teeth with boredom. I fully understand. Even feel guilty sometimes. But judge for yourself: how can I employ him, keep him amused? What errand can I send him on? What busi-

ness? At best to deliver something, fly off somewhere. That's about it. And there he is, you see, thirsting for something grand. Eager to build palaces, crystal bridges and all that sort of stuff. That wouldn't be so bad perhaps in a way. But how can I put it, my respected Valentine... All that he builds is fine from an architectural viewpoint, but unfortunately it doesn't last. It's all done as if out of soap suds or whipped cream. Not a single staircase will bear a man's weight, it disappears, evaporates right underfoot. You see, it's meant for fairy tale lightness, not earthly gravitation. But just try saying one word — Oh dear me. He'll sulk for days on end.'

'Well, never mind, that's all right, let him take the map,' said Val, scarcely controlling his impatience.

'It's easy to say,' sighed Alex, his face clouded in uncertainty.

With a hopeless look upon his face he shook his head.

'But, it's his character, you see, if only you knew. He's as spoilt as a little girl. As peevish as an old biddy. And jealous into the bargain. Just set him free — and straightaway he starts his reproaches and suspicions. It's just unbearable. No, I fear he'll mess up our fairy tale. Of course, he'll get the map to *Dream*, no doubt about it. But he's bound to pay a visit to Captains' Island on the way, he won't let the chance slip. And then you'll see, he'll cause some disgraceful scandal there. He'll offend the captains no end, telling them they're all conceited cads. Something of the sort. I know him well enough. No, we must resort to the genie's services only in the most extreme circumstances. What do you think? Oh, indubitably.'

Val held his tongue and kept silent. I have to tell you though, it took a lot of doing. So that was it. That meant he wouldn't see the genie. Oh dear, it would have made Alyonka's eyes pop out of her head.

On the other hand, though, he was no longer an infant. He would not pester Alex, and beg him:

'Dear Alex, dear magician, go on, show me the genie, please do...'

'So, we'll have to find some other way out,' said the magician; 'in other words, another entry into the fairy tale.'

He paused for a moment, pondering on something, then added,

'Incidentally, you are a dab hand at painting, my dear Valentine.'

'Five out of ten,' mumbled Val gloomily. 'I get five out of ten for painting.'

'Oh, what five out of ten got to do with it?' exclaimed Alex. 'The main thing is imagination, fantasy, and five's got nothing to do with it. Now, my young friend, I want you to paint a swallow. Yes, yes, a plain old swallow. And my job'll be... Well, you'll see for yourself.'

Well, it was a shame, of course, a terrible shame that Alex had not shown him the genie. He might have guessed how much Val wanted to see it. But since he wanted a swallow painted, it had to be done. And as expertly as possible. Val set to thinking, trying to recall what they looked like, those swallows. Generally speaking, he was a conscientious lad.

Val sketched a round head with a short beak and a big curious eye. Then he drew two tapering wings and a black forked tail.

Val remembered that swallows' heads were black as well, and he painted on black smooth cap. He did the best he could. He paid no heed when two black round drops, one big, one small, fell onto the paper. Even so the swallow turned out pretty well. At least seven out of ten. Or maybe an A—.

Alex the Magician also took to the swallow. A smile spread across his face as he leaned back to get a better view.

'Just as I said. Terrific. Simply exquisite,' he exclaimed in admiration.

And taking up the painting, he softly muttered to himself:

All I see upon this sheet
Vanquish fire and sleet.
Leave the paper, come on out,
Come alive and fly about.

And in that instant the pointed-winged Swallow flew up, flapping his wings so hard it fluttered the paper in Alex's hands.

It circled the ceiling once, dived into the corner and suddenly bumped into the mirror.

'Oh, my dear,' said the magician gently, 'that isn't the window, you know, it's the mirror. You made a mistake. Now do calm down.'

He held out a hand and the Swallow trustingly landed on his outstretched finger.

Val could not take his eyes from the bird.

A real, live bird. Well I'm blowed, alive and kicking. And the spitting image of what he had painted. With a black cap and pointed wings.

The Swallow swiftly turned his head and fixed his little round eye on Val with a kindly, friendly look. Then all at once it hopped on to Val's hand.

He felt the Swallow's cold little claws moving along his hand. Ever so lightly.

'He knows you painted him, you know,' said Alex smiling.

'Of course, I know,' replied the Swallow in a high voice.

Well I never! He can even talk. How fascinating. Val found it hard to get his breath.

'What's that?' said Alex pointing to two black spots on Val's hand. One big, one small.

'Just a bit of dirt,' said Val, carelessly brushing aside the question. But Alex shook his head anxiously.

Val carefully wet his finger so as not to scare the Swallow, then wiped the black spot on his hand — but it would not rub off.

The Swallow, giving a doleful squawk, flew up and circled the room. And in the twinkling of an eye the two spots vanished from Val's hand, as if they'd never been.

The Swallow settled on the carved frame of the old mirror and folded his fine narrow wings. Val caught sight of the same black spots on the smooth mirror. Noiselessly and purposefully, the bird flew over to the bookcase. And the black spots, one big, one small, followed him, tracing black lines in the air.

'It's all clear,' shouted the magician sadly, wringing his hands. 'What a nitwit I am. I should have brought only the Swallow to life, but I've brought to life everything on the paper. So now those black spots will follow our Swallow forever and everywhere, and all because I'm such a nitwit, ever mixing things up and forgetting...'

'It's hardly worth bothering about,' twittered the Swallow quietly, and turned away. But Val could see he was sad and had only spoken to comfort Alex.

'If only I had not decided to be captain...' thought Val. 'If only I could be something else ... I, too, would become a magician. Who knows, maybe Alyonka'll become a magician too? Why not? She has just the right eyes for it.'

Alex wiped his forehead with his palm as if driving away unhappy thoughts.

'Dear Swallow,' he said, 'we need, it's absolutely vital, to deliver this map to the brig *Dream*. You see, *Dream* has set course for Captains' Island. Do you think you can do it?'

'Of course,' came back the Swallow's little voice. 'I know full well where it is. Fairy Tale Ocean, right?'

Alex carefully rolled up the map and tied it with a strong, fine thread. The Swallow picked up the roll by the thread's bow and flew to the windowsill.

Then Val saw how dark it had become outside, and how it was snowing again. The damp, melting snowflakes were clinging to one another, falling, falling in thick flakes, as if making a last attempt to cover the whole ground. The lamps were barely visible through the snow, giving off a blurred glow.

'What awful weather,' muttered Alex, doubtfully shaking his head.

'I shall fly by quite a different route,' said the Swallow, or something like that. It was hard to make out what he said with his beak holding the thread that tied the Fairy Tale Island map.

Alex opened wide the top window, letting in the smell of cold, dank dampness, as well as a flurry of icy, clinging snowflakes, which

must have been hiding behind the window just waiting their chance to rush in.

The snowflakes swirled about Val, hitting him in the face and striving to blind him. He could just see Alex helping the Swallow to squeeze the rolled-up map through the top window.

'I'll try to come to you in your dreams and let you know all the details... Only don't go to sleep on your left side...' It was the Swallow calling indistinctly through the snow and the whistling of the wind.

Alex hurried to bang the window shut.

Then Val caught sight of the Swallow: he had not flown away, he was helplessly and convulsively beating its wings against the window, as if something was holding him back.

'It's my fault,' yelled magician Alex. 'I shut the window, leaving one of the black spots inside the room.'

He rushed to open the window.

'Oh, my dear bird. Forgive me, I'm so dim. Pleasant journey.'

The Swallow hopped easily from the window and immediately disappeared along with the map tied up in the strong thread.

The white snow descended like a curtain behind it.

Val and the magician were standing together by the window, while the snowflakes flying into the room melted on their faces.

Chapter 4

Genie or Taxi, Which Is Better? And More: 'He Will Become a Captain'

Alex finally shut the top window, shivering from the chill wind, and rubbed his shoulders hard.

The grandfather clock slowly and majestically chimed eight times.

'A very serious and clever clock,' said Alex. 'While we've been busy with important affairs, it has been tactfully quiet. Did you notice? And now, just listen to it chiming. It probably wants to remind me of something I've forgotten. I just don't know how I would cope without that clock, what with my forgetfulness. I have a feeling it wishes to remind me it's time for you to go home. Your mother is probably getting worried.'

'Mother...' breathed Val.

All of a sudden he felt very tired. It was as if he'd just run twenty kilometres. You can evidently get tired from surprise too. And how! Maybe surprise should be measured in kilometres? Well, what do you think we should measure surprise in?

'Now let's call a taxi,' said Alex. 'Or no, no. We'll do something else. We'll summon up the genie. That is, we won't summon him.

we'll let him out of the thermos flask, and he'll transport you to your mother in a jiffy. Anyway he needs some small job to do, and it will do him good to get a breath of fresh air.'

Val was over the moon: so he would see the genie, after all. This was his lucky day.

He could hardly restrain himself from letting out a deafening squeal, and from clapping his hands. If only he could do a somersault, he'd feel much better. But no, that was what kids did. He had to keep himself in firm check.

Alex the Magician took a blue thermos flask down from the shelf; it had a pattern drawn on the side. It was either some blurred words or some sort of mysterious signs.

'You're probably puzzled why my genie resides in a thermos flask and not in some ancient brass bottle, as a normal genie does?' Alex spoke in a bored, expressionless tone. With a weary sigh, he put his hand on the flask's white plastic lid. 'If only you knew how tired I am of explaining. For the umpteenth time... Well, this is it. It's all because my genie was much hardier than the brass bottle. The bottle fell into disrepair long ago, crumbled to dust, so to speak, while my genie is still as young as ever, as you'll see for yourself. Incidentally, how many years genies live and whether they die at all is still a riddle, and science hasn't yet unravelled it.'

Alex leant over the blue thermos flask and muttered these words in a quiet, monotonous tone.

Genie, arise, get down to business
Time to leave at once the thermos.

Val held onto the stool with both hands, huddled up, his head drawn into his shoulders, having a premonition that something quite extraordinary was about to happen.

Alex unscrewed the flask's white cap, pulled out the darkened stopper and swiftly stepped towards Val. He put his arm round the lad's shoulders.

There was a mounting rumbling, whistling, crackling. The heavy curtains on the windows shook, spreading dust around. A dark stream of smoke rushed howling from the neck of the flask, billowed out, rose to the ceiling, grew dark and thick, then turned into a huge genie in a striped turban.

The genie had a dusky face, as if carved from a rough, time-blackened stone. Deep wrinkles were etched into it like fissures in a rock. His mighty, gnarled arms were crossed over his chest.

'What is your command, O Master?' roared the genie. Then he added at once, in a complaining whine,

'Ah! you haven't let me out of the flask since last Tuesday... and today's Saturday. Here I was sitting locked up a whole week... With nothing to do.'

Alex raised his eyes to the ceiling in anguish. Even Val realised such conversations were quite common between them.

'First it wasn't Tuesday but Thursday,' objected the magician patiently, as if to a child. 'And second, today isn't Saturday at all, it's still Friday. So you've been sitting in the thermos no more than a day.'

'Maybe days in a flask drag out longer than when you're at liberty, have you thought of that?' said the genie, giving Alex a profoundly reproachful look. 'I'd like to see you sitting in the flask for just a week. You'd soon be singing a different tune... Days in the flask are so long, endless and so uneventful... But you couldn't give a fig, could you? You wither away, miserable genie, as long as I don't hear your sighs. You wither away with naught to do, needed by no one and forgotten by all. Oh, don't you take pity on a clapped-out old hapless genie. And what is more...'

Here the genie threw a jealous and suspicious look at Val.

'What is more, I wouldn't be surprised if you've made up your mind to abandon sorcery and become a captain. There again, of course...'

'Now you've reminded me,' interrupted Alex. 'I have a job for you. An errand for you to run.'

'Really?' exclaimed the genie, jumping with joy.

No, perhaps he should not have jumped after all. I'm sure you would

agree. When a genie jumps everything in the room jumps with him: bookcases, table, chairs, old settee and even the sideboard full of china. All the things in the room seemed to let out a mournful groan; something clattered, books went flying all over the place.

If Alex had not been holding Val by the shoulders, the lad would probably have been sent flying along with his four-legged stool.

No, genies have no business jumping with joy, that's for sure!

'An errand?' the genie mumbled impatiently. 'Then speak, tell me what it is, O Master! Some palace to erect? Some building? Flying somewhere? Where to? To the Sahara? The North Pole? Maybe into a fairy tale? For ages I've been intending to drop in on Captains' Island. Those captains! Conceited cads! I'd like to show them a thing or two. So we're going into a fairy tale, eh?'

The magician exchanged glances with Val and just shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

'No, old sport, something else,' he said to the genie gently and soothingly. 'You have to take me and this here respected Valentine to his mother.'

'Is that all?' blurted out the genie haughtily and despondently, his lower lip jutting out. 'Using me as a taxi, eh? A contemptible petrol-spewing monster with a meter for a heart.'

'Let's agree on everything straightaway,' Alex hastened to say. 'So there are no recriminations afterwards. You drop us off at the lift, all right? And wait there for me. At the entrance, you know, where it's warm and the radiators are nice and hot.'

'You are ashamed of me, O Master,' cried out the genie in a voice of thunder. And he ground his teeth so hard that long barbed sparks poured from his mouth. One dropped with a crackle on the binding of an ancient book, and Alex quickly snuffed it out with his hand. 'Oh what an insult! It would be better if I was strong tea or coffee in my lonely thermos,' wailed the genie, rolling his eyes and rocking to and fro. 'Oh, how miserable I am. Go on, despise me, stamp your feet on me, have a good laugh at me...'

'Now listen here, there's an end to my patience too, you know,' shouted the magician, unable to restrain himself any longer and banging his fist on the table.

The genie's purple face turned green and he fell to his knees with a crash.

'Have mercy, O Master,' he moaned, choking with fright. His frightened breath made the carpet curl up at the edge. 'Pardon your ignoble servant. Punish him not for his ingratitude. Humble and dumb, huddled in a corner, I shall await you in the entrance, by the lift, until your further orders.'

'You're overstepping the mark again,' muttered Alex with an angry scowl. 'Never mind your "humble and dumb" twaddle.'

He took Val's boots from the radiator. They were warm and as hard as gouged-out tree bark.

Val slipped his feet into them, took a few steps. The iron-hard boots creaked but had no give in them at all.

'Never mind, you do some walking about in them and they'll give,' said Alex before turning once again to the genie. 'Time to go, one way or another.'

What happened next seemed too fast for Val, too improbable, like in a dream.

The window flew open by itself and his face caught the cold and damp of waning winter.

Val felt a void under his feet as if the floor had caved in and he was hanging in mid-air. When he glanced down, he saw the city rooftops, fleeting lights and cars' headlamps lengthened by their motion.

Yet the whole time he felt Alex's strong arm gripping him by the waist. To tell the truth, Val was not entirely sure whose arm it was: the magician's or the genie's.

He even had no time to take fright before he heard the familiar door of the apartment block entrance bang shut behind them, and he saw the genie, bashfully cowering in the corner by the postboxes. Val did not remember going up in the lift with magician Alex. All he recalled was Mother appearing before him.

She was standing in the apartment doorway, her arms hanging limp; she seemed not at all pleased to see him, she was so pale and her eyes were so anguished and strange.

"We just didn't know what to do, where to phone,' she said quietly.

Val was rather hurt that Mother spoke thus to the magician. Still, how was she to know he was a magician?

'It's all my fault, mine alone,' said Alex in embarrassment, raising his hat graciously. 'Forgot about the time, as always. But believe me, your young captain and I really had very important affairs to discuss.'

With those words, Alex thrust Val towards his mother.

'So he's a captain now,' said Mother with a weak smile.

'Yes, a captain,' said Alex, rather anxiously and slightly bashfully, as usual. 'I have no doubt at all about that. You see, I am awaited downstairs by my ... never mind who. And if anyone were to set eyes on my ... never mind who. Especially some dear old woman... In a word I must rush. If I did have just a moment I would certainly explain the absolutely certain signs proving that your dear, respected Valentine, as you quaintly call him, will become a captain without any shadow of a doubt.'

And, uttering those puzzling words, the magician once more raised his hat and began hurriedly to descend the stairs.

Now, my friends, we bid farewell to Alex, and to Val who, in my view, is a very great chap.

We shall meet up again with Alex during the course of our story. So too with the painted Swallow.

But it's time we were off.

We're going where Fairy Tale Ocean rolls its deep blue waves, to the wonderful land of Dreams and Fantasy. We're heading straight for Captains' Island, the haven of all little boats made by children from all over the world.

Chapter 5

In Goldfish Tavern and More: the Tale of the Trained Sardine

On Captains' Island the lofty palm trees rustled in the breeze. Their hairy trunks and long leaves glimmered orange in the setting sun.

Amazingly big, bright butterflies were flying above the palms drowsily, seeking a cosier nook for the night. They would flick the palm-tree tops with their gossamer wings, shedding multicoloured pollen.

Shaggy nocturnal moths that had appeared just as soon as darkness drew in hurried them on their way. These new creatures were fat and clumsy with stumpy wings, like little dust bags.

'How dare they fly about,' snorted the moths. 'Now it's our turn. Soon the candles, lamps and lanterns will come on. And we can beat against the glass and make circles about the lights.'

Excited voices drifted in from the harbourside. Work was still in full swing there. Sailors would be mending their boats, battered and buffetted by the last storm.

Yes, mateys, Fairy Tale Ocean may be called capricious. Capricious is hardly the word. Irascible, even bullying.

Storms and gales would rage up out of the blue without the slightest warning. All of a sudden, totally unexpectedly, the sky would grow dark, and shaggy storm clouds would gather. A frenzied wind would seem to stir them into the sea. A howling and rumbling roaring would break out. And there would be the ninth wave bearing down on you, that most dangerous and perfidious of all rollers, as all sailors know. And after that ninth wave, lo and behold, another ninth wave, and after that yet another.

So I beg of you, mateys, don't be surprised at what you see.

Since you've come to Captains' Island you'll have plenty of chance to open your eyes wide and say: 'Well I never! I'll be jiggered!'

Now, how we measure surprise is something we still have to decide. Not in kilometres, that's for sure. And I don't reckon weighing surprise on the scales is the best way. True, there was one chump who assured me he doles out ten drops of surprise into a glass and takes that at night before bed. I think he must have been pulling my leg.

But don't let's get carried away.

As always, the *Merry Troll* had had the worst time of it weathering the storm.

Captain Nils was stalking the deck, vexed and angry, glowering malevolently from under his knitted brows, as the nimble sailors, clambering about the shrouds with brushes and glue pots, were patching up the paper sails.

Yes, indeed! The paper sails really were the bane of the Captain's life. After every storm the *Merry Troll* only just made it back to port, and the sodden shreds of sail hanging from the mast presented a pitiful sight.

'Why, Oh why, did my Nils give her paper sails when he built the *Merry Troll*?' Captain Nils would wonder, as he clenched his fists in his pockets in impotent rage. 'After all, the *Troll* is a splendid vessel, holds fast to her course, handles beautifully. But the sails? He must have run out of patience, that's it. Made the sails any old

how. Skimped on them, just to launch her into the water a bit sooner.'

Right then Captain Nils's temper finally burst. For into the harbour, tacking clumsily between the light sailing ships, came the *Grossvater*, solidly built, a heavy and sluggish trading ship.

On deck stood Captain Max Maurice Gustav Theodore Friedrich, nicknamed Captain Doitright, his feet planted firmly upon the wooden planks.

As always the *Grossvater* tied up alongside the *Merry Troll.*

'Does it on purpose, of course, on purpose,' thought Captain Nils bitterly.

Biting his lip in anguish he glanced at the storm-frayed shreds of his paper sails.

Everything about Captain Doitright annoyed Captain Nils. His obviously conceited smile and his carroty-coloured freckles, like nail-heads well hammered into the round physiognomy, and the broad pockets of his jerkin made from coarse but good-quality cloth, and the thick-soled studded boots that made his every step sound like a hammer blow.

And the main thing that particularly offended the terribly touchy Captain Nils was his annoying habit of repeating, at every occasion,

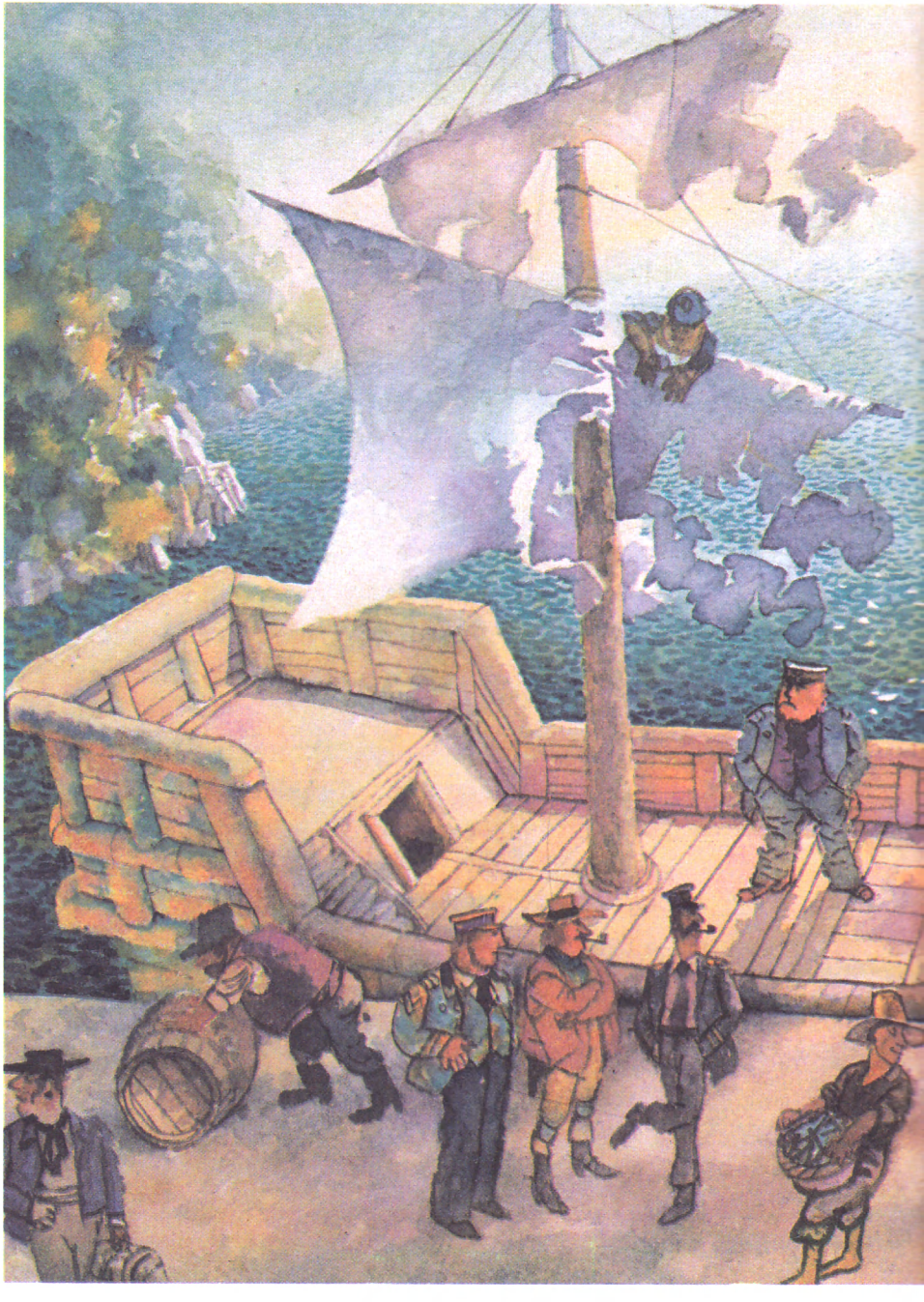
'Do it right! That's what my late Granddad used to say.'

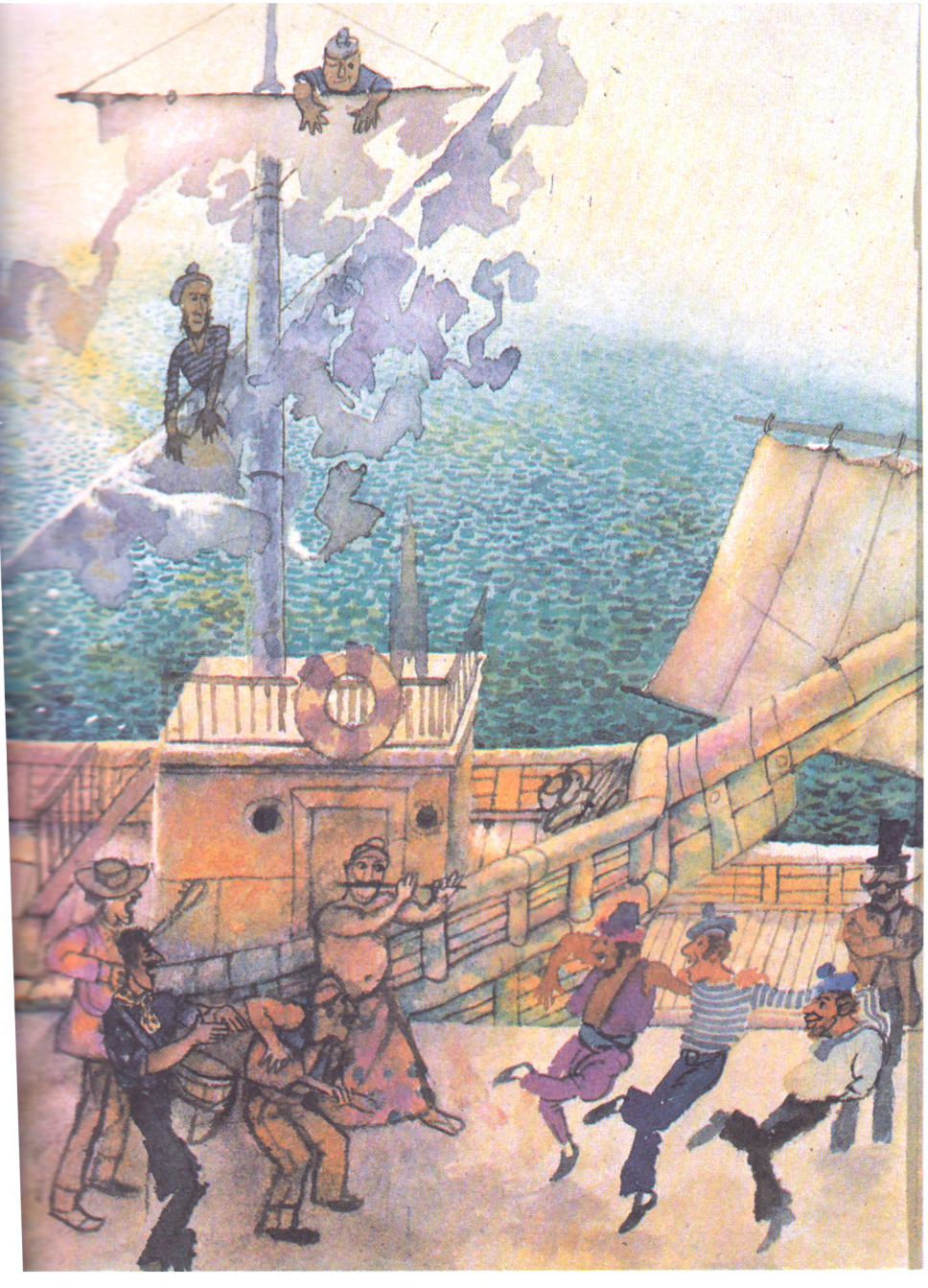
Like a white-winged seagull, the brig *Dream* was approaching the island. The mariners were neatly and nimbly taking down the sails.

'Probably the best ship here,' thought Captain Nils with involuntary envy, as he followed the *Dream* with his gaze. 'There's no getting away from it, the captain on the *Dream* is a real salt. A splendid seaman, courageous to a fault, he'd never let you down. You won't find one better than our Captain Valentine.'

Captain Nils felt better, and now stepped more jauntily up the stone path towards the patterned lantern swaying and winking hospitably above the entrance to the Goldfish harbour tavern.

As always the captains were assembling in the harbour tavern as darkness fell.





It was not long before Captain Valentine, too, put in an appearance.

I had better warn you straightaway, dear readers, that he was not at all that little Val, the first-former whom we met at the beginning of this unusual story.

Don't forget we've crossed Fairy Tale Ocean and landed on Captains' Island where the captains of children's dreams live.

So it is hardly surprising that a grown-up fellow, broad-shouldered and handsome, with a bold, perhaps even somewhat severe face, should cross the threshold. In a word, he was exactly how little Val had pictured himself grown up.

Even amidst the weather-beaten, sun- and salt-streaked faces of the captains his face stood out as especially dark-complexioned, as if he had had more than his fair share of sunshine and wind. And the calm look of his grey eyes betrayed a rare strength of character.

Captain Valentine gripped Captain Nils by the shoulders. No questions: not about his trip, nor the *Merry Troll*'s tussle with the storm.

And Captain Nils mentally thanked him for it.

Whistling a happy tune, into the tavern strode Captain Jean, short, wiry and nimble.

His light, snubnosed *Albatross* was painted from keel to sails with coloured pencils and paints.

The little dog Pif decorated the flag, dressed up in a blue sailor's hat jauntily draped over one ear.

Evidently little Jean had been afraid the gales and bad weather would gradually rub off his decorations and so he had put a stock of paints and box of coloured pencils in the *Albatross*'s hold. Nor did he forget a large eraser just in case his captain would have to rub something out or make a correction.

Captain Jean was a terrific painter and after every trip he renewed and touched up his drawings while his sailors were polishing the decks until they shone.

Shortly Captain Doitright entered the tavern. He slammed the door shut with such force that it banged like an old-time cannon. Grabbing

hold of the back of a heavy oak chair, he noisily yanked it over to the table and seated himself next to Captain Jean, spreading his feet wide.

Last to stomp into the tavern was Admiral Christopher Columbus, leaning on a time-worn cane.

I must ask you again, mateys, not to be surprised. Anyway, what's special about that? Yes, Christopher Columbus was also a young lad once. Yes, little Christopher Columbus had also built boats.

Another thing, there is surely not a sailor in the world who would not think of Admiral Columbus if an uncharted land suddenly appeared on the horizon like a miracle. No matter what you say, Christopher Columbus, discoverer of new lands, lives on in every sailor's heart, that's for sure.

So if you put your minds to it properly, there can surely be no one, my friends, who'd think it strange that after the other captains old Admiral Christopher Columbus should cross the threshold of the tavern.

'What a cold and draughty night!' the Admiral muttered. 'All the devils must have left Hades and congregated here, puffing out their cheeks and raising a terrible wind. A man cannot take a single step.'

He invariably expressed himself in a somewhat old-fashioned and highflown tone.

It so happens that the weather was quite windless. Simply the old Admiral was a bit tottery on his pins, and had aches in his bones in all weathers.

Admiral Columbus sat down in a chair, bending his knees with a creaking noise, and moved his seat a bit closer to the blazing fire. He removed his hat with its mangy ostrich feather and adjusted the yellowing lace cuffs the colour of a stearin candle.

Captain Valentine clapped his hands loudly, killing a grey moth that was circling round the famous Admiral and taking too close an interest in his dilapidated camisole and threadbare hat.

'I thank you,' said Christopher Columbus, nodding slowly and majestically to Captain Valentine. 'If I were sailing with fellows like

you, Captain, I would very likely discover another couple of Americas somewhere or other.'

'Hmm,' responded Captain Valentine doubtfully; he had a better grasp of geography than the old buffer.

The Good Companion popped into the tavern for a few ticks. He always looked in for ten minutes or so, no more.

Captain Valentine seated the Good Companion next to him, poured him out a goblet of dark old wine, and the Good Companion gave his usual absent-minded and sad smile.

His story really was quite uncommon.

He had sailed to Captains' Island in a small paper boat, not even glued together, just simply folded out of a sheet of graph paper evidently torn out of a maths book. To let you into a secret, though don't tell a soul I said so, his boat was more like a triangular paper hat than a boat.

Scarcely had the boat dropped anchor in the harbour and the captain and his scant crew stepped foot safely on shore than the sodden vessel began to sink, flattened out and gave way at the seams. The very first oncoming wave carried off the pieces of paper into the open sea.

'Well now, since I now have no boat I'll become the Good Companion,' said the grieving captain. 'Just imagine some poor fellow losing his way and wandering along an unfamiliar road in the night, in the pitch-black gloom. Someone has to meet him on his way, haven't they? So let it be me.'

Ever since then the Good Companion has wandered along the lanes of Captains' Island all night and every night. To tell you the truth, Captains' Island is not particularly big; all the same, it did have quite a few lanes. A broad straight road linked the harbour and the town where the captains had their lodgings.

'It's the road to town,' the Good Companion liked to say, 'yet if you travel along it in the opposite direction it will be the road to the harbour. So it's really two roads.'

There was also a narrow, looping path that led from the Goldfish Tavern to the tall unapproachable cliffs which reared up bleakly at the northernmost end of the island.

'That's the road to the lonely cliffs,' the Good Companion would say. 'Yet if you travel back along it, it will be an entirely different road. It will be the road to the Goldfish Tavern.'

He was counting up the roads on his fingers.

So you can see for yourselves, he had his work cut out patrolling the island.

'Stay a while with us, let's sup together, Good Companion,' suggested Captain Valentine. 'It promises to be a chill night.'

'Unfortunately...' The Good Companion shrugged his shoulders as he gazed anxiously out of the window.

'What if, just imagine, if right now, right this minute someone's lost his way in the dark. Will there be no one to meet him, nobody to help him, keep up his spirits, show him the right road?'

And the Good Companion hurriedly left the tavern.

'Idler, vagabond,' sniffed the tavern hostess with a shrug of her shoulders.

'Still thy tongue, woman,' said Admiral Columbus, giving her a stern look. 'What do you know about it? Your business consists in decanting wine from the wood and presenting it with a graceful curtsey.'

'Come off it, Admiral,' guffawed Captain Doitright. 'Our hostess, our pretty little Gina can tittle-tattle all she wants. As long as she does her own job right! That's the main thing, as my late Granddad was fond of saying.'

'You are very kind, Captain,' said the tavern hostess with a smile. 'And so is your late Granddad too.'

Yes, I suppose you could call the Goldfish Tavern hostess a real beauty. Her jet-black hair was pinned up in a tall intricate hair-do, and the candlelight danced amid the shining black ringlets. One look from her flashing dark eyes would sometimes be so penetrating, so sharper than sharp, you'd think her eyes could prick or sting you... But ... pretty little Gina smiled. She smiled always and to all.

A tender, but somehow fixed smile that seemed never to leave her face.

The lame helper with the wooden leg like an upturned bottle once said how he was climbing up to his attic one night when he paused to take a breath at his mistress's door. Just like that, out of curiosity, he glanced through the half-open door.

The smooth silvery moon was shining brightly.

The hostess was asleep, and in the moonlight her white face seemed even paler, her dark hair seemed even blacker. And even in her sleep she was smiling the same tender fixed smile.

It was an eerie moment for the old servant. Icy fingers seemed to crawl up his spine and he hobbled up to his attic as fast as he could. He crawled under the blanket and piled all his clothes on top of him. He lay there, teeth chattering from the cold, until morning, unable to get warm or fall asleep...

Captain Valentine glanced out of the window into the quickly gathering dusk.

'Tommy should be back today from his first trip,' he said quietly.

'Oh la la!' said Captain Jean, raising his goblet. 'Good health to Tommy the young captain.'

'An able young fellow-me-lad,' mumbled old Admiral Columbus. 'Where, begging your pardon, has he headed for?'

'A young dolphin has run aground on Limping Octopus Island,' replied Captain Doitright. 'Tommy set sail for Octopus.' And he added with a grin, 'I'm sure Tommy will make out. As my Granddad was fond of saying, you must do it right.'

Unable to contain himself, the terribly touchy Captain Nils flushed crimson and leapt from his chair. In everything he saw aspersions on the *Merry Troll* and her paper sails.

'This isn't the first time, and if you're trying to say that...' he started, his voice breaking with hurt pride. But Captain Valentine added a word,

'Calm down, matey. Nobody would dream of offending you.'

And he gave his shoulder a gentle and firm squeeze, forcing him to sit down again.

'I recall my ship *Santa Maria* dropping anchor off an island,' muttered old Admiral Columbus absent-mindedly, shaking his head. 'Yes, a good five hundred years have passed, no less. Oh time, time!'

Christopher Columbus himself had build that ship when he was still a lad.

The tavern hostess set a goose on the spit and set to turning it above the fire. The fat dripped into the hearth with a crackle, splattering and lighting up the sooty bricks.

Black Pussy alongside her stretched out her neck and licked her lips. But at once turned away with a timorous, indifferent look, as if her mistress had stuck an old boot instead of a fat goose on the spit.

I have to tell you that Black Pussy, whom we shall see much more of a little later, was far from stupid. What's more, she had cat-like cunning and could well conceal her real intentions. I reckon you wouldn't find a slyer cat in a fairy tale or even the whole wide world.

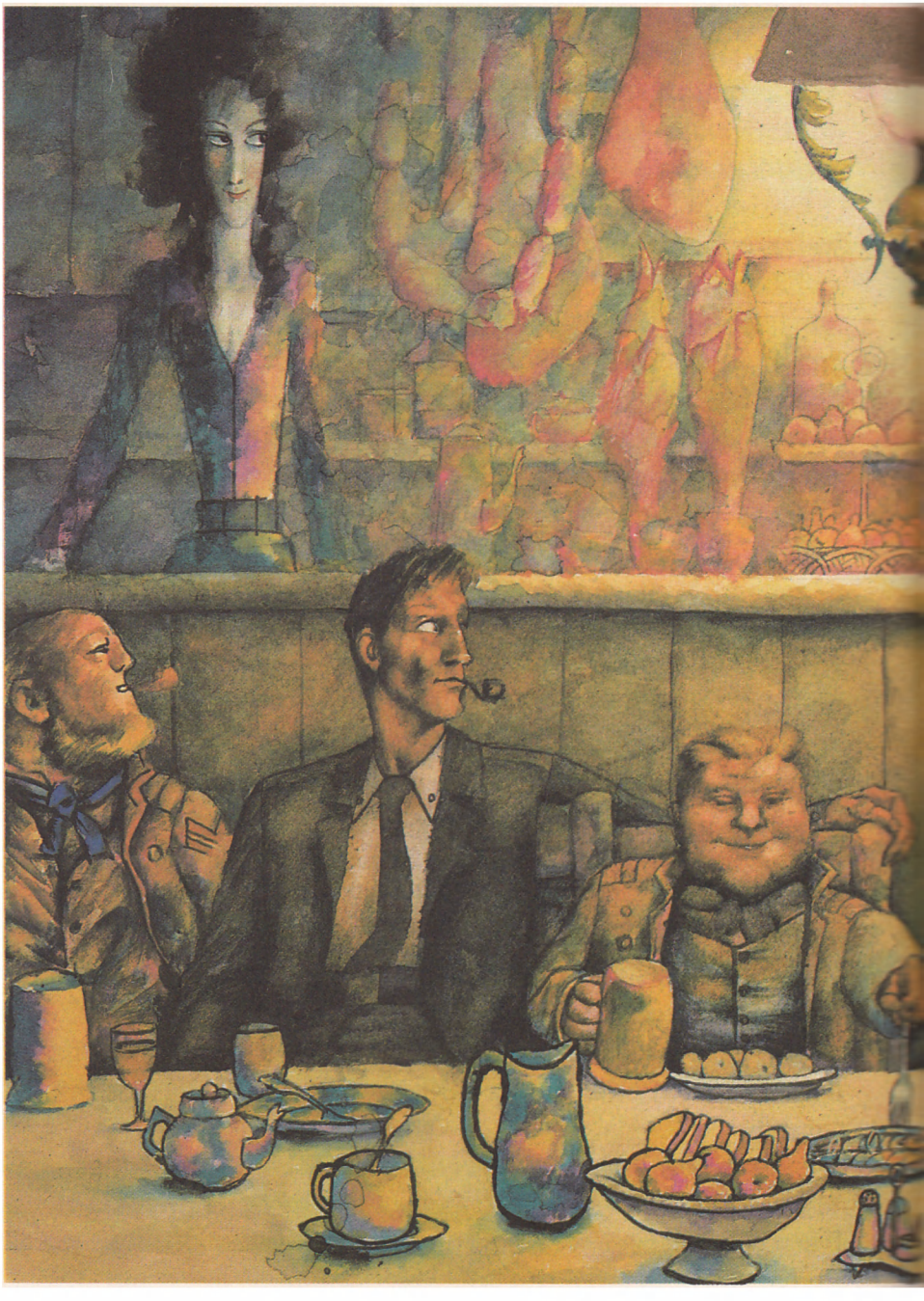
All of a sudden the massive tavern door swung open. The wind, with the tang of salt and sea and seaweed, bent flat the candle flame.

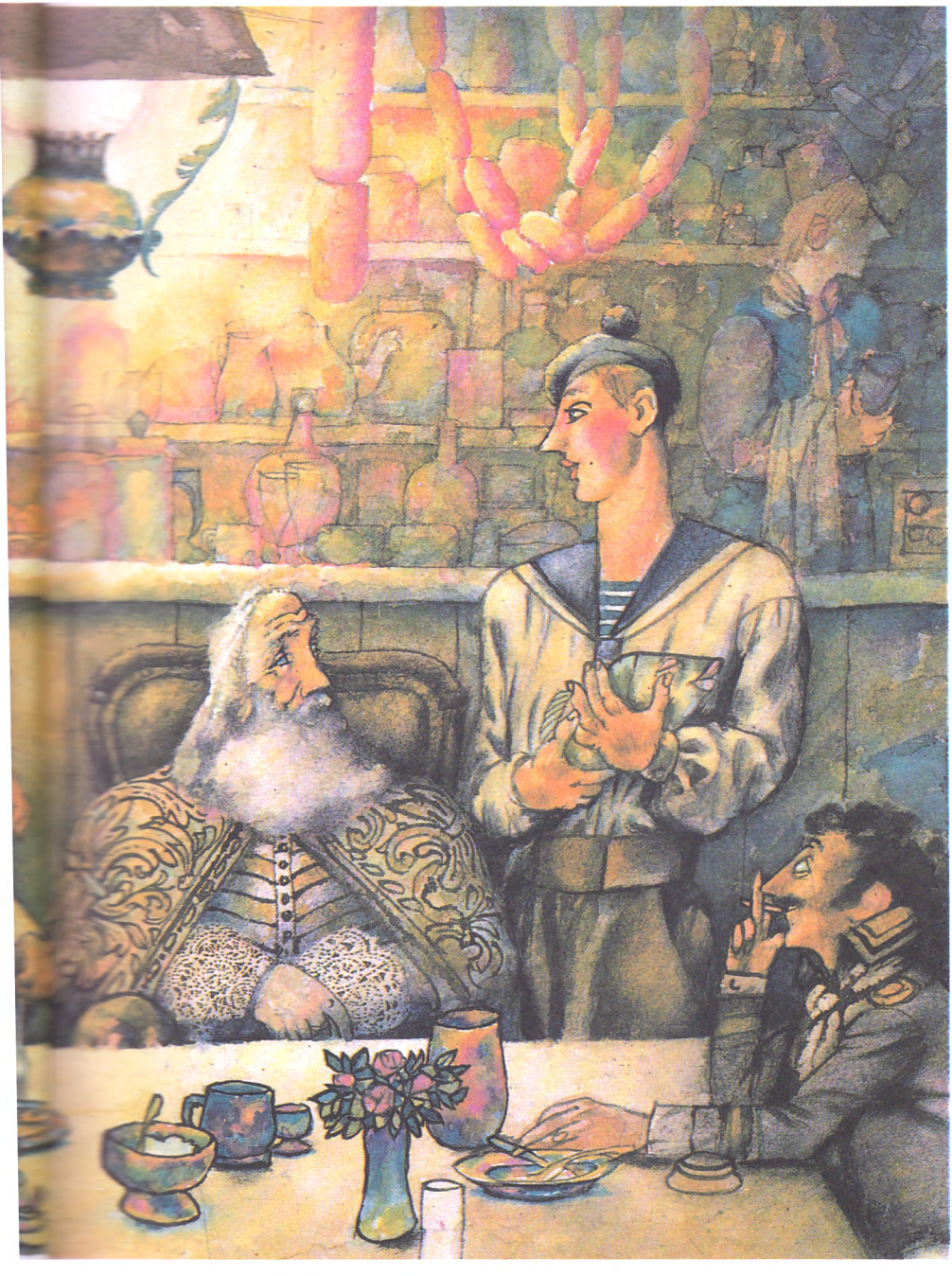
Through the door stepped sailor Sou'wester, a lanky, blue-eyed happy-go-lucky lad.

Sou'wester was carefully and tenderly clutching a big fish with large shining scales like great coins piled one on top of the other.

This exceedingly shy and taciturn young man had an abiding, yet truly uncommon, passion. He spent all his watch-free time teaching fish to talk. It has to be said that he did have some considerable success.

Sou'wester began by teaching a whole dozen herring to speak. The herring, however, had turned out to be empty, chattering bores. Herrings' heads would pop up from the water all over the place and squeal; they spent the whole day swapping tales and gossip, talking





the hind leg off a donkey. For some reason the main topic of conversation was the Sea Horse.

'Have you heard, have you heard?'

'What? What?'

'Don't you know, you live in the sea and know nothing?'

'Well, that Sea Horse has again swum to the coral grotto.'

'You don't say!'

'And the flying fish flew off somewhere yesterday. I saw them myself, making their sandwiches for the trip.'

'What are you babbling about? I've just run into them myself!'

From dawn to dusk squealing herring voices echoed across the waves. It was enough to drive you mad. Sou'wester had to stop all his lessons with the herring.

The wise sardine was Sou'wester's favourite pupil: sparing of word, unruffled, never wasting speech.

And it was with her, the wise Sardine, that sailor Sou'wester had come into the Goldfish Tavern. He stood hesitating at the door, pressing his trained Sardine to his chest.

Black Pussy's eyes flashed with a piercing green light.

'Turn your eyes out!' the tavern hostess hissed.

In a flash Black Pussy's eyes lost their glow, became empty, yellow, as flat as a pancake.

It cannot be denied that in that instant Black Pussy was thinking to herself.

'I wonder whether a talking fish is tastier than a non-talking one? I reckon it's tastier, much tastier ... though I'd love to find out. Meouw-mmm-meouw.'

Naturally enough, looking at Black Pussy no one could have guessed what she was thinking. Let me repeat: she was the cat's whiskers at hiding her thoughts.

All the captains as one turned their heads to get a better look at the trained fish. Poor old Sou'wester quite lost his head at being the centre of attention. I should add here that the more talking fish appeared in

the sea, the more taciturn, ironically enough, Sou'wester himself became.

'What's the matter, sailor Sou'wester?' Captain Valentine asked.

'Captain,' muttered Sou'wester agitatedly, 'please don't be surprised at a fish out of water.'

'What? Fish with my porter? Don't mind if I do,' mumbled the hard-of-hearing Admiral Christopher Columbus.

'She was swimming in the creek...' Sou'wester tried again.

'Fish in aspic? Not bad either!' muttered the old Admiral with a smirk.

'Better let her tell you herself,' said Sou'wester, completely at a loss.

Sou'wester cautiously let Sardine down onto the floor and stood her on her tail.

The trained Sardine swayed a few times but kept her balance by spreading out her tail fins. Then she opened her mouth wide, waggling her gills.

'She's thirsty,' whispered Sou'wester, appealing to the hostess. 'Can you spare a drop of water, quite a lot really.'

With a gentle smile the hostess handed him a sooty kettle with dented sides.

Sou'wester started to pour water from the kettle right into Sardine's wide-open mouth. The fish took a deep breath and heaved a loud sigh of relief. Somewhere inside her something creaked with the strain as if some old mechanism had been wound up. Then all of a sudden the Sardine spoke.

'Darkness, enough to knock a fish's eye out... Tommy's ship was swimming along, bothering no one. Swallowing no one. Waving its fins and swimming along. In the darkness the current drove the ship to Black Island... That's the pirate cove... Pirates went and bo ... bo ... bo...'

The Sardine could not get out the unfamiliar word.

'Boarded it,' prompted Sou'wester in a whisper.

'Bo-ard-ed it,' repeated the trained Sardine painstakingly.

'Pirates! Shiver my timbers!' roared Admiral Columbus with a toss of his grey-yellowish locks, still curled in the fashion of olden days. With trembling hands he had half drawn from its scabbard his ancient sword all covered in reddish patterns of rust.

'The young captain and all his crew came floating to the surface bellies upwards,' muttered the trained Sardine at her last gasp. 'Dolphins arrived in the nick of time... Saved them... Took ashore...'

The shocked captains stared at the Sardine, waiting for her perhaps to utter something more. But the fish fell silent. And nobody noticed the tavern hostess and Black Pussy exchanging fleeting glances, and Black Pussy turned away, hiding the green triumphant glare in her eyes.

Sou'wester picked up the trained Sardine, pressed her to his chest and tenderly patted her scales.

'Clever girl to tell it all so clearly... Hold on, I'll have you back in the sea in a jiffy,' he muttered and, rocking the fish in his arms like a little child, he left the tavern.

'Pirates... That's no oo-la-la!' drawled Captain Jean in dismay.

The tavern hostess, pretty little Gina, gave the glowing embers a poke as if nothing was amiss, and tossed on some more logs.

'Captains, there you go believing all this babbling,' she remarked sarcastically. 'Worse than kids, that you are. Just stop and think: how can there be pirates in our waters?'

'That's about the size of it,' said Captain Valentine with a frown. 'I'm not that convinced of it myself. All the same though...'

Captain Valentine did not have time to finish. The door flew open and into the tavern tottered a young Black lad. His wet clothes were stuck to his body.

He stood there in the doorway and, to save himself from falling, caught hold of the doorpost.

Chapter 6

The One-Eyed Fortune-Teller Makes Her Appearance and More: Dream *Heads for the Sea*

'Tommy, my lad!' exclaimed Captain Valentine as he rushed forward.

'Pirates seized my ship,' Tommy brought out. 'We put up a fight as best we could. But they attacked us in the dark, caught us unawares.'

'Well done, pirates. You've got to do it right,' exclaimed Captain Doitright in a fervour. Almost at once, however, he remembered himself, scratched his head with his stumpy fingers in embarrassment, and blurted out in some confusion, 'Pardon me, mateys, I seem to have said the wrong thing, haven't I? I certainly didn't mean to cause offence. Do believe me.'

But none of the captains even glanced his way, and he lapsed into silence, his head bent guiltily.

'My lovely ship made of palm wood. And it was the first time I had taken her to sea...' Tommy's lips were quivering like a child's, his round black eyes had filled with tears.

Captain Valentine unclasped Tommy's frozen and crampseized hands, took him by the shoulders and seated him closer to the fiercely blazing fire to stop him shivering.

'Follow me, my hearties. To the caravel. After the pirates!' yelled Captain Christopher Columbus in a squeaky voice. He stood up on his tottery old legs and fell back at once on his chair.

'The pirates will now be up to their mischief, especially at night, in the dark,' said Captain Valentine anxiously. 'Pirates. Not the most pleasant of news. Well, Tommy, come on Tommy, don't be downhearted. You're among friends now.'

'If it's less, it's more, and no bother,' pretty little Gina mumbled to herself as she turned the nicely-browning goose over the red-hot coals.

She often uttered these enigmatic, incomprehensible words, for such was her wont.

Black Pussy sat tight and just switched her gaze from the captains to the tavern hostess. Her eyes glowed like two flashing beacons.

'I seem to have weighed it all up and made the right choice,' Pussy was thinking. 'I soberly considered all eventualities. Of course, no one's able to foretell everything... But I reckon I'm not far wrong. The captains, however, are certainly in the doldrums. Meouw-meouw.'

The captains sat in dispirited silence. Captain Valentine had filled his pipe with tobacco, yet he even forgot to light it.

Pirates! Where on earth did they spring from on Black Island?

Could it be that some young person had read books of sea wolves and, just for a joke or in downright devilment, had stuck a skull and crossbones to his boat's mast? No, surely not!

One way or another, however, the pirates were a reality, harsh reality.

Once settled on Black Island it was easy for them to make the Island impregnable; meanwhile, the warm current that rounded Captains' Island from the south was bound to bear all ships straight to Black Island. It was very simple to go off course, especially in the dark on a moonless night.

Swallow Two Spots had trouble squeezing through the tavern window. He was so called because everywhere he went the two black round spots followed. Just like blots on a piece of paper. One bigger than the other.

It was some time since the Swallow had delivered the precious Fairy Tale Ocean map to *Dream*. He took to Captains' Island at once. He was fond of the lofty murmuring palms and the transluscent waves of Fairy Tale Ocean. Best of all, he made friends with the bold and noble captains.

One day the Swallow came flying to Captains' Island, holding an ancient faded drawing in its beak.

'I do hope... I think you'll like it,' he chirped gaily.

The piece of paper depicted a two-masted brig with full wind-blown sails. A multicoloured rainbow arched tautly above it.

'Oh la la! A splendid ship,' exclaimed Captain Jean.

'The ship's drawn right. No getting away from it,' agreed Captain Doitright with an approving nod of the head.

'Only snag is it's just a painting,' remarked Captain Valentine with regret. 'Such a vessel would adorn our fleet. By the way, where did you come by it, dear Swallow?'

'Quite by chance, you know,' replied the Swallow. 'Quite an amusing story. Do listen.'

The Swallow recounted how, after calling on Alex the Magician, he had decided on his return to drop in for a while to the city park and have a chinwag with some of his friends. But all the birds had flown away on their various errands, and there was only her old friend the Wild Wind whistling down an empty avenue.

The Wild Wind was preoccupied, playing with a faded sheet of paper on which an ancient ship was painted. The Wind would drag the painting along the ground, then lift it up and whirl it about in the air along with a column of dust.

'Where'd you get hold of that painting?' asked the Swallow in curiosity.

'I dived in someone's open window,' whistled the Wind in an

offhand way. 'I could see my old mate Draughty amusing himself with some old book. Leafing through it, though the pages could hardly take the strain, and any moment would be flying round the room. Well, I took a fancy to one little picture, gave it a good tug, tore it from the book and bore it off through the open window. I'm tired of it now though. It's too heavy, I'm all out of breath. No, give me something light and airy, something that loves flying and whirling in the air.'

'If that's the case, then let's do a deal,' suggested the Swallow. 'You give me the painting. In exchange I'll give you three of my feathers. You won't get anything floating so wonderfully in the air as a swallow's feathers, you'll see.'

The Wild Wind did not take long to make up his mind.

He whirled about, twirled the three downy feathers in the air and, whistling with glee, bore them off somewhere on high, probably to show off his new plaything to the clouds.

In the meantime the Swallow flew off with the ship's painting to Captains' Island.

The captains nailed the painting to the soot-blackened tavern wall.

And a strange thing happened. Whether it was due to the damp winter nights and smoke from the fire, or to something else, the ship's painting began to change with time. The multicoloured rainbow faded and disappeared altogether. The sails decayed as if from idleness, lazily hanging from the stays. The ropes and shrouds became entangled and rotted away. Its ribs began to protrude through the rotting sides.

'I think it's pining away here on the wall,' said Captain Valentine one day sadly. 'After all, it never did become a real ship. It's no fun eternally sailing into Never-Never Land.'

As always, the captains cheered up with Swallow Two Spots around.

In the crowded tavern the lively, dainty Swallow seemed big and awkward. He now approached Captain Valentine with heavy tread, waddling like a duck.

'Huh, painted birds...' snorted Black Pussy into her whiskers haughtily. She turned away with an indifferent and careless air.

'I wonder what it would be like to taste, that painted bird?' was what Black Pussy was actually thinking at that very moment. 'And what if it's tastier than the real thing? Ah, those lovely little wings, that painted neck!'

But, of course, looking at Pussy no one would have guessed what she was thinking about.

Two Spots swiftly turned his head in its black shiny cap and looked at the captains.

'I know, I know. I know it all,' quickly chirped Two Spots.

It was too hot and stuffy in the tavern for him. He liked flying, liked cutting the wind in two with his wings, liked the boundless expanse of the deep blue seas.

'Everyone knows it,' the Swallow continued. 'Even those half-witted herring are jabbering about it. True, for some reason they blame the Sea Horse who hasn't the first thing to do with it. But to business. Pirates are pirates. And they will give you a lot of trouble. I advise you to listen to my opinion. Of course, you may well think that since I'm painted, my opinion is coloured too. And the coloured opinion of a painted Swallow is perhaps, in your view, not worth the paper it's painted on. If that's the case I'll shut up at once...'

'No, no, dear Two Spots, we don't think that at all,' said Captain Valentine gently.

Two Spots stared fixedly at him, gravely nodding his head in the black satin cap.

'Right, so this is it,' he continued in a calmer tone. 'A kind and wise man lives in a big city on a big real river. His name is Alex the Magician. If it hadn't been for him ... well, never mind. It doesn't concern us now. There's something more important. He knows Captains' Island as if he's been here many times. You should seek his advice. I'm sure he could help you.'

'Why not? Good idea,' pronounced Captain Valentine thoughtfully. 'By the way, mateys, I have a map. An excellent map... But...'

'What do you mean "but"?' exclaimed Captain Doitright in a

hoarse voice. He had jumped up, flinging back the oak stool sharply. 'Everything's got to be done right. And if you had the heart of a sailor and your sails weren't of...'

Captain Valentine looked at him in silence, knitting his brows. Meanwhile, Captain Jean, pursing his lips and whistling some airy and jaunty tune, gave him a sharp dig in the ribs with his elbow, without anyone noticing.

Captain Doitright turned purple and gave a loud pained snort before collapsing heavily on his stool again, hissing through his teeth,

'Some people get so molly-coddled around here.'

'Do you understand what I had in mind?' continued Captain Valentine. 'Yes. The Drawn Line. The Line that encircles our Fairy Tale Ocean.'

'Oh, there's nothing you can do about that,' broke in pretty little Gina with a smile. She tossed her head and each inky black ringlet briefly caught the glittering light of the candles, so that for an instant her black locks turned golden as they glimmered and gleamed. 'There's nothing you can do about it. Nobody has the power to cross the Drawn Line.'

That was the sad truth. On all sides Fairy Tale Ocean was encircled by the wide Drawn Line, and quite a few ships had floundered when running up against it on a starless night or in a fog.

The most amazing thing was that all the children's boats that made sail for Captains' Island from every corner of the world crossed it without feeling the slightest bump. But the other way about... No, the Drawn Line was more dangerous than any underwater rock, any reef.

'I hadn't thought of that,' said Swallow Two Spots with a guilty air, scratching his short beak with its foot. 'I fly over it so easily.'

'To think! Excuse me, but for that it's best to have something real, not painted, on your shoulders,' purred Black Pussy spitefully, unable to contain herself any longer.

Suddenly Captain Jean clapped his hand loudly to his forehead, as if striking dead an importune gnat.

'I know what we should do!' he exclaimed. 'The rubber! You know, the eraser. The eraser that my young Jean providently stored in the *Albatross*'s hold. Now at last we've found a use for it.'

'Hold on, hold on,' cried Captain Valentine, now out of his chair. 'What a good idea! And what if, indeed, we try to rub out the Drawn Line with it? And make our way through the new straits into the real ocean on the other side?'

'The Drawn Line isn't so even or thick around Hide-and-Seek Island,' added Two Spots joyfully. 'I had noticed that some time ago. I'll fly with you and...'

'Champion,' agreed Captain Valentine with a nod. 'Many thanks, dear Two Spots. In that case we sail at dawn.'

'Oh la la,' exclaimed Captain Jean, merrily tossing his blue sailor's hat in the air. 'Bon voyage, mon ami. I'm sure my Jean's eraser won't let you down.'

Everyone raised their glasses. Even ginger-haired Captain Nils. Though, to tell you the truth, his heart had sunk to his boots. No, it wasn't that he envied Captain Valentine. He liked him too much for that. But how he longed to be able to set off in search of any adventures that very minute and brave any dangers.

Oh, little Nils, you restless and careless lad, how much harm you have done because you were too lazy to make trusty sails for the *Merry Troll*!

The tavern hostess, still with the same tender smile, leant over and whispered something into Black Pussy's ear.

'Of course!' purred Black Pussy good-humouredly.

If the truth be known, at that instant she was actually thinking in disappointment,

'All and everyone of you can sit here in the warmth, by the fire, to your heart's content. Only I have to go off into the cold, the damp, the mist. Still, there we are, since I've set my mind to it.'

Black Pussy gave a grudging glance at the merrily crackling logs on the fire, tarried a while in the doorway, shivered a little from the evening dampness and vanished into the gloom.

A bat nicknamed Uninvited Guest then flew in through the window; she was the only bat living on Captains' Island. She normally made do for the night in the old tower ruins on Lonely Cliff: latching on to half-rotting beams with her feet, she would hang upside down, sighing to herself from her lonely melancholy thoughts.

Uninvited Guest squeaked something indistinct, as if she wished to warn the captains of something, then fluttered through the window.

Through the door slipped Black Pussy, fastidiously groomed her smooth coat, shaking off the tiny milk-white droplets of mist, then jumped on to a high stool.

Catching her mistress's eye, she nodded, as if to say all's fine. Then as if there was nothing amiss she took to licking her hind leg with some circumspection.

At that moment a poor old ragged woman, scraggy and bent, pushed her way sideways through the door. In one hand she held a pack of cards spread out like a fan. She evidently earned her living by telling fortunes. One eye was covered with a black patch, and a brass earring about the size of a saucer hung down from one ear.

The poor fortune-teller timidly stretched large red mitts covered in spots towards the flames, blinking pitifully with her only eye.

Right up to her chin she was wrapped up in a shabby floral shawl, to the fringe of which pieces of seaweed and dry crab claws were still clinging. Great worn-out men's boots protruded beneath the frilled frayed skirt.

'Let me tell your fortune, my handsome, my love,' said the fortune-teller in a husky voice, making for old Admiral Columbus.

'Warm yourself up, poor creature, and be on your way,' snorted the old Admiral. 'I don't believe in those devilish tricks of yours, oh no I don't. I well recall, about five hundred years ago it was, a woman like you told my Christopher Columbus's fortune, saying he wouldn't discover anything. And what, begging your pardon, happened?'

The Good Companion sidled into the tavern to get warm.

'It's a dank night, though...' he began, then suddenly fell silent

as he caught sight of the one-eyed fortune-teller. 'Strange, I must say, very strange. I've been round the whole island today, and more than once too. But for some reason I never saw you. Today seems to be a night of surprises. I've just bumped into another stranger. I'll tell you one thing: a very unusual species. Scruffy, an enormous great earring in one ear and two pistols at his side. Just imagine — one-eyed too. I was on my way from the harbour to town at the time.

'And I have come along the road from town to the harbour,' the fortune-teller hurriedly interjected. 'We were travelling by different routes. So how could we have met?'

The fortune-teller turned away, shielding her face with the shawl.

'All the same, I don't quite get it... There's something wrong somewhere,' muttered the Good Companion pensively.

He stood around for a bit longer, gazing absent-mindedly at the light, darting tongues of flame in the hearth, then left the tavern.

The fortune-teller wiped her red mitts, and sidled along the wall, making for Captain Valentine.

'Let me read your palm, my handsome, my love. I'll reveal the whole truth,' she whispered ingratiatingly in his ear.

But Captain Valentine dismissed her firmly.

'No, you can save me that, dearie.'

In an instant she had hopped across to Captain Jean, seizing his hand in a vice-like grip.

'I can foretell his fate from your hand too,' she said, pointing a gnarled finger at Captain Valentine. Bending over Captain Jean's palm, she droned,

'I see, I see, in the morning your friend Valentine intends to set off on a dangerous voyage. Am I right? Nothing but the truth? There you are then!'

'You mean to say his fate's inscribed on my hand?' said Captain Jean in sincere amazement.

'And what ill fortune it is too!' interjected the fortune-teller, giving Captain Valentine an avid glance. 'I swear to the devil, this line on your hand foretells something nasty in store for your friend.

A thousand devils! He'll have a top-gallant mast fall on him and squash him like a fly.'

'How horrible, Madam,' gasped Captain Jean, growing pale. 'Like a fly? Is there no way you can change the course of the line on my palm? I'd do it, for my friend's sake.'

'Cut it out, Jean, old sport,' said Captain Valentine with a smile. 'It's just a load of old codswallop.'

'It gets even worse,' intoned the fortune-teller, her huge earring bobbing about. 'Devil take it, this line here shows there'll be a storm and his ship'll split into three pieces.'

'Captain Valentine, I beg of you, I beseech you, give up that trip,' cried Captain Jean.

There's no getting away from it, Captain Jean was a truly fearless soul, an excellent companion, but everyone has his weak spot: he believed in all the omens, fortune-telling and, like a little child, was scared stiff of bad dreams.

Captain Valentine paid no heed to the fortune-teller's wailing and moaning, and began to bid farewell to his mates. He firmly shook the hand of red-haired Captain Nils. Then, gingerly, he gave the gentlest of squeezes to old Admiral Columbus's hand as if it was of the most fragile glass and could shatter from the slightest jolt.

'Farewell, mateys. We'll be out to sea at the crack of dawn.'

Captain Valentine gave Tommy a hug. And over his curly head he exchanged meaningful glances with the other captains.

No one noticed the tavern hostess bending over Black Pussy and whispering something quickly in her ear.

Captain Valentine made for the door. But he had not taken three steps before Pussy had leapt down from the stool and, lightly scampering on her velvet paws like a black shadow, crossed his path.

'There's bad luck for you, by the way,' she purred genially.

As white as a sheet, Captain Jean grabbed Valentine by the shoulder.

'The black cat crossed your path!' he gasped, his voice quivering. 'I beseech you, heed my warning, don't go to sea. My Granddad, the

toughest mariner around ... spurned a cat's warning... It crossed his path just the same. He sailed half a mile from shore and ... ended up in Davy Jones's Locker.'

Captain Valentine gave a grin, bent down and patted Black Pussy. He was about to tickle her ear with his finger when Pussy hissed malevolently,

'Keep your paws to yourself.'

And, with offended air, she leapt up to the stool and turned her back on Captain Valentine.

'Captain,' came the soft voice of pretty little Gina, 'maybe you'll take me with you? As cook, at least. I've got a yearning for the sea. You know, I fancy seeing cabbage and beetroot soup slurping in the tureens. Say the word and I'll take little Pussy along too, please.'

Black Pussy instantly flew from the stool, gave a metallic sort of purr, looked meekly up at the Captain and started rubbing against his legs.

'Well now, I've no objection,' he said with a nod.

'Nine feet of water beneath the keel!' yelled old Admiral Christopher Columbus in his rickety voice, emptying the pewter goblet in one draught and lowering it heavily on to the table.

The hostess hastily tied a few things up into a bundle, as she issued final instructions to the one-legged servant.

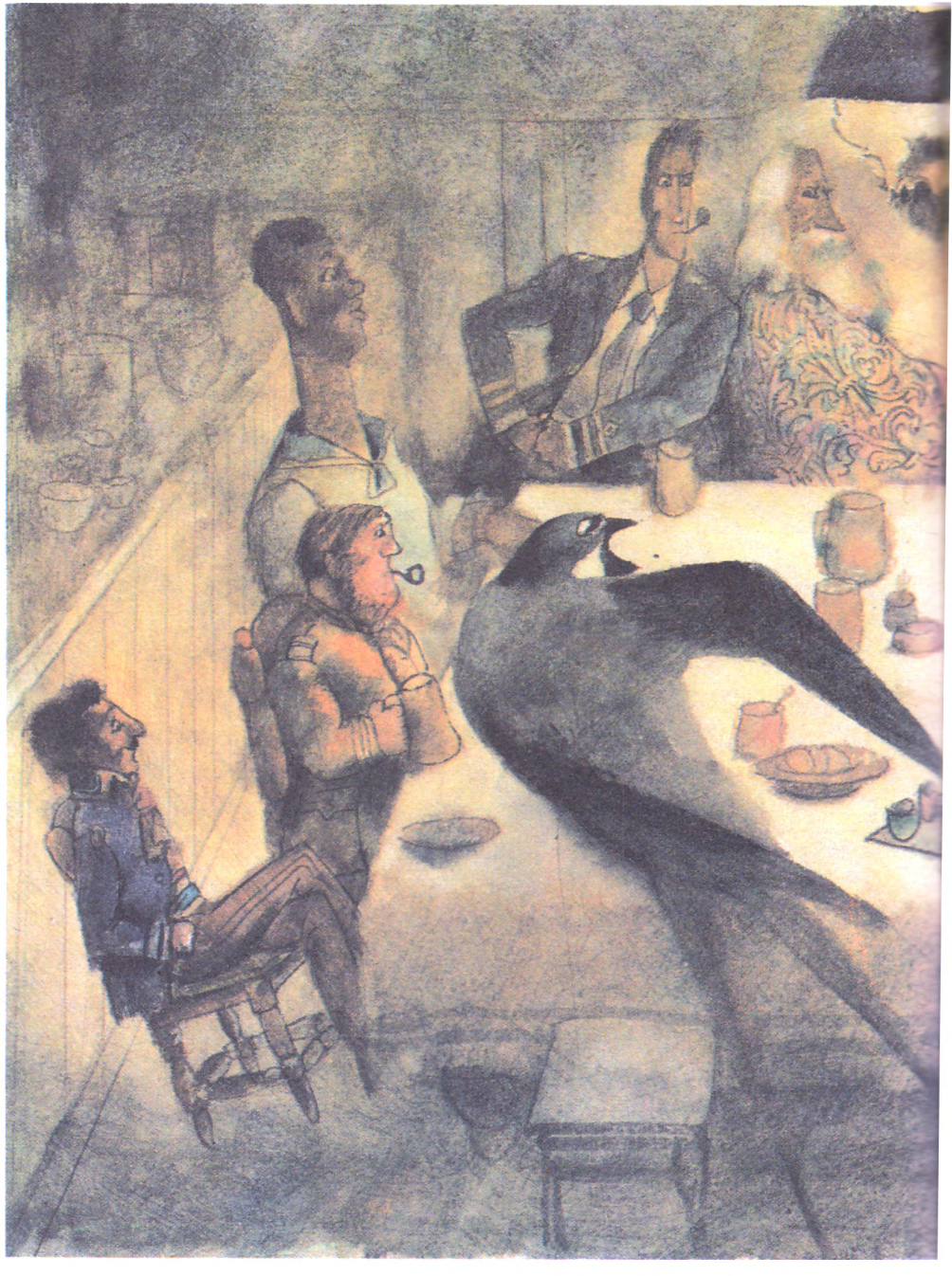
Meanwhile, Pussy bade farewell to the tavern by giving all corners and chair legs a good sniff.

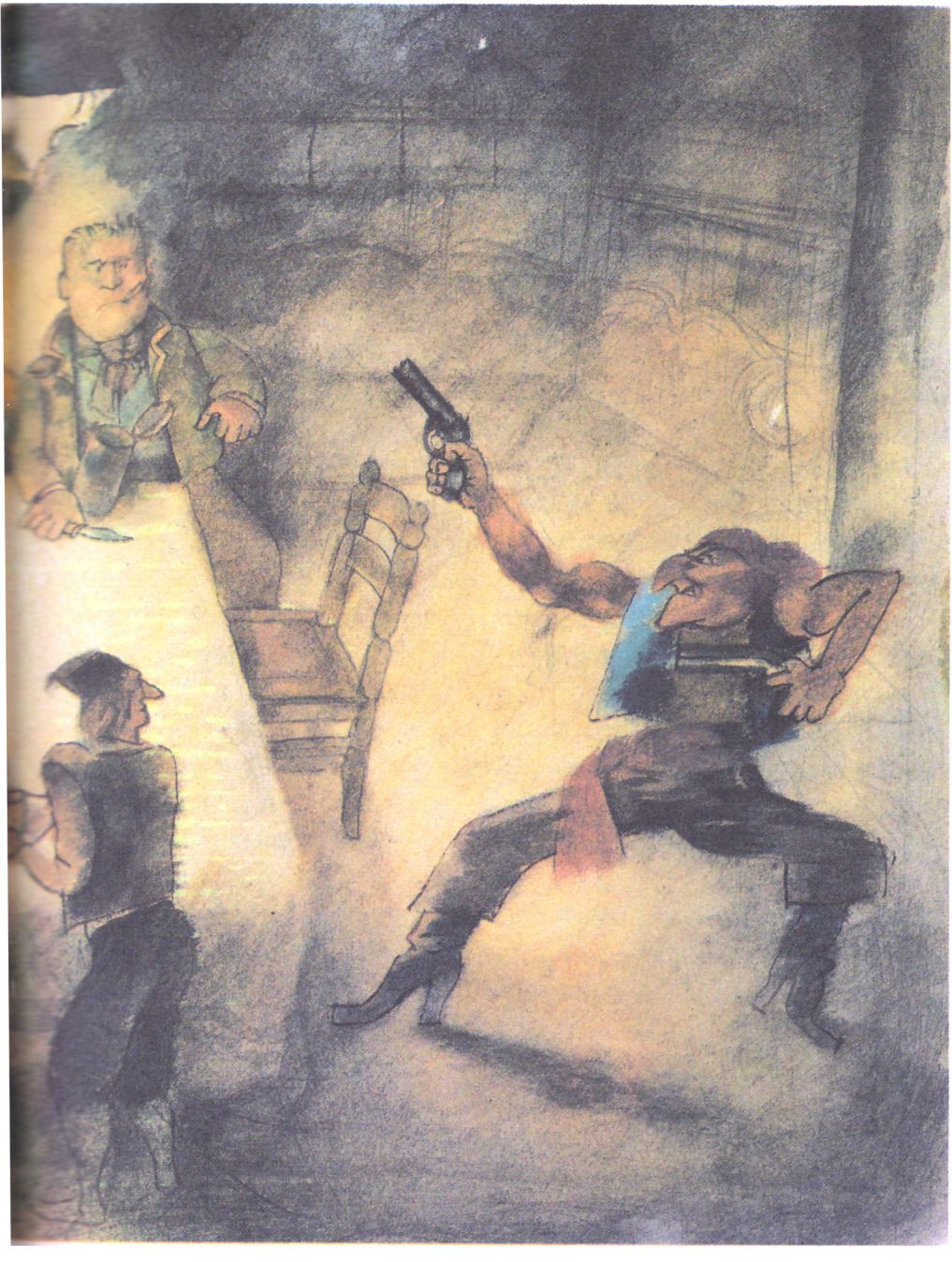
The hostess shoved the one-eyed fortune-teller in the back with her fist as she was standing there looking glum and biting her dirty nails.

'Clear off, since you can't foretell properly,' hissed the hostess, her eyes flashing.

However, noticing the perplexed gaze of Captain Valentine, she caught herself in time and smilingly murmured.

'Oh my, those raggle-taggle beggars. You've got to keep your eyes peeled or you'll find yourself a few silver spoons short. Come on, my beauty, let's see you turn your pockets out.'





'Go on, go on, off you go, old gal,' said Captain Doitright with a wave of the hand. 'We have no time for you just now!'

The fortune-teller made for the door, downcast and bent. But she did not notice her gaudy shawl catching on the table edge by its frayed fringe. And the shawl slid from her shoulders.

'Well, I'll be jiggered!' all the captains cried out as one.

The fortune-teller was wearing a man's shirt open to the waist to reveal a hairy chest. And from under the broad red belt protruded a pair of heavy pistols.

'Carramba, what have we here?' cried Admiral Columbus in breaking voice.

Seeing his secret was out, the pirate straightened up, gave a piercing whistle and whipped both pistols from his belt in the twinkling of an eye. He took aim at the lamp and a shot rang out. The light vanished. A second bullet neatly extinguished the candle flame. The tavern was plunged into utter gloom.

All they could hear was the sharp tinkling of broken glass. The thud of the thrown-open window frame. Muffled curses.

All fell quiet.

And then the captains heard the voice of the sea. The beating of waves, hissing of foam and silence. Beating of waves and silence.

Eyes gradually grew accustomed to the dark. A velvety-blue patch of sky appeared through the window. White wavecrests glimmered in the darkness.

'Well I'm blowed! Pirates. Wonders will never cease,' exclaimed the tavern hostess lighting a candle. 'And in the twentieth century too, for heaven's sake, who'd have thought it!'

Chapter 7

North and South and More: Encounter with a Bear Cub Whose Hobby Is Geography

Do you know, mateys, how the sun shines above Fairy Tale Ocean?

The sun's rays penetrate right through the waves and reach the very bottom of the sea, warming all its numerous denizens and residents. If you put your face to the water you'll see the Sea Horse deep down on the sea bed taking a circumspect peep out of a coral grotto. He has a good scoutround to ensure no jabbering herring are in the vicinity.

Over there is the hermit crab slowly etching some sort of signs with his claw on the wavy sand. The deep current effaces them, but the wise crab keeps re-etching them in his thoughtful way.

But don't let's waste precious time. Let's hasten to climb aboard the good ship *Dream*. The crew has already loaded up with fresh-water barrels and provisions. On the Captain's instructions they have taken on board a whole sackful of dried mosquitoes and midges for Swallow Two Spots, even though he had said they weren't necessary because, during the voyage he would lose his appetite altogether.

What is crucial, the hold contained the *Dream*'s most coveted cargo — the eraser from the *Albatross*. The sailors had certainly excelled themselves. It was no easy job hauling the springy, slippery rubber up the gangway and then lowering it into the hold by steel hawsers.

And so at last, the good ship *Dream*, propelled by a fair wind, swiftly sailed from her home port on Captains' Island.

The sea was gentle and tranquil as if it had never been capricious and rowdy. Light and dark blue jellyfish slowly drifted on the waves. They heaved soundless and senile sighs. Even when *Dream* had managed to leave them far behind, the jellyfish were still sighing and bobbing in the waves.

Now and again a flock of flying fish would flit by, like a handful of silver coins tossed up by the waves.

Captain Valentine and his First Mate Senya, lean and lanky and nicknamed Tops'l Senya, had stood for hours poring over the old map that had once been drawn by little Val.

The paper had faded badly and frayed at the edges. Which is hardly surprising when you know that Captain Valentine never went to sea without the trusty map.

'Let's head due south now,' Captain Valentine was saying, lighting up his favourite old pipe. 'Aye, due south to Lunch Break Island.'

Thick layers of smoke floated about the cabin, obscuring the porthole lights. From above, on deck, loud voices could be heard and someone's heavy boots made a thudding noise. Suddenly there was a great hullabaloo and much bustling about.

'Sou'wester, cast the net. Flipper's to starboard, jaws to port. Haul it in! Take the strain together, mateys!'

'That Sou'wester has let his Sardine go for a frisk again,' said Captain Valentine testily. 'And these latitudes are teeming with sharks. She'll come a cropper one of these days, return with no tail.'

'She'll be lucky to get away with no tail,' added First Mate Senya thoughtfully.

The trained Sardine, grave and sober-minded, was the darling of the entire crew.

She had made the voyage in the hold, in a seawater barrel; but she had pined for the waves, for the boundless expanses of Fairy Tale Ocean. So sometimes Sou'wester did let her out for a bit of a swim. True, the crew kept a weather eye out, as did the Sardine herself, for no matter how much she enjoyed her freedom, she had to keep her wits about her.

'Another thing,' interjected Captain Valentine, 'it's about time we fed Two Spots.'

Dream's hold contained yet another passenger: Swallow Two Spots.

The poor creature had run into an unexpected misadventure: he had fallen seriously ill.

What would you expect, for pity's sake? Pretty little Gina had accidently spilled a whole kettle of boiling water over one of the black spots that invariably followed the Swallow.

The former tavern hostess made a thousand apologies. She 'oh'd' and 'ah'd' and rolled her eyes in distress. It didn't do any good though. The scalded black spot began to run while the poor Swallow's temperature mounted.

First Mate Tops'l Senya gladly gave him his cabin, spread a mattress on the floor and laid a cold compress on the suffering spot. But the Swallow became quite miserable and weakly turned away from the saucer of dried mosquitoes.

'He's only a painted swallow, after all,' said Captain Valentine one day, deep in thought. 'Perhaps he would prefer to dine on something more fitting... I mean painted food.'

Yes, indeed, the Swallow could hardly find the strength to refuse such titbits. And so Captain Valentine and First Mate Senya drew all manner of midges and beetle-spiders on their hands with coloured pencils, taking them each day to treat the ailing Swallow.

Two Spots eagerly pecked up the crayoned insects from their palms.

When Captain Valentine and First Mate Senya took the box of

crayons and went to call on Swallow as usual, a voice hissed elsewhere on board: 'Now!'

It was Gina to Black Pussy.

'Well now, I made the right choice,' Pussy was thinking. 'You won't get far being honest and fair. Cunning and guile — there's your strength. That being so, let's act on it. Meouw!'

And Black Pussy followed in the wake of the ship's cook as she slipped unnoticed into the captain's cabin.

'Phew!' Pussy gave an involuntary snort and a disgusted wave of her paw, trying to disperse the tobacco fug.

The ship's cook meanwhile was bending over the cherished map and, with her sharp kitchen knife, she neatly scratched out the letters N and S, for North and South.

That done, Gina moistened a pencil in her mouth and drew the letters S and N where there had formerly been N and S, thereby switching north and south.

'If it's less, it's more, and no bother!' smirked pretty little Gina.

A minute later there wasn't a soul in the captain's cabin.

It was not long before Captain Valentine and First Mate Tops'l Senya were back, rubbing their smarting palms. He may have been a painted Swallow, but his beak was darn sharp and hard.

'I find our little birdie in much better nick today,' said Captain Valentine. 'His feathers are shining and his appetite is quite good.'

'Quite good, quite good,' repeated First Mate Senya absently, gazing at the map. 'Don't you think, though, Captain, that while tracing the route you and I boobed?'

'Boobed? Impossible!' said Captain Valentine, bending over the map. 'By the looks of things, though, we may well have done. I can't fathom how. It beats me. We reckoned the Lunch Break Archipelago lay to the south...'

'It looks like we should sail due north though.'

'Ha-ha-ha,' came chortles from the ship's cook down in the galley. 'There's likely to be an almighty bump when *Dream* bangs its nose slap bang against the North Pole!'

So we should not be surprised that as the days went by the long-awaited Archipelago never came in sight, even though red circles appeared around First Mate Senya's eyes from the binoculars.

'Maybe we passed it in the night?' he mused in perplexity.

'Out of the question!' retorted Captain Valentine with a firm shake of the head. 'What about the bells?'

'Aye,' exclaimed First Mate Senya, suddenly remembering. 'How could I forget?'

You see, Lunch Break Archipelago made a ringing noise. Aye, mateys, don't be surprised, it actually did ring. In fact, that's exactly where it got its name from.

Those flowering islands hosted a maze of evergreen trees; and they had little green bells in place of leaves. The nimble and graceful deer that roamed through its glades would touch the thick branches with their antlers. That would make their antlers tinkle melodiously as well.

In those islands there were musical rabbits and jingling vixen as well.

Zoos the world over dreamed of getting their hands on just one teeny-weeny grey jingling mouse.

And why not? Those amazing creatures easily adapted to new conditions.

The rabbits, as is their wont, munched carrots with relish.

Kittens purred, played with paper on a string and eagerly lapped up cream.

The sad thing was that they would steadily lose their jingle; on the third or fourth day the ringing would completely fade away. So now you see why no one could pass Lunch Break Archipelago in the depths of night without noticing it.

The islands would ring out in the slightest breeze, at each flight of sparrows from branch to branch.

The sea about the islands was full of all kinds of faintly jingling fish whose ringing would grow more and more muffled as they dived to the sea bed.

Thus, the good ship *Dream* sailed on northwards.

The nightwatch sailors, muffled up in thick woolen jerseys, could not stop their teeth chattering as if they were tapping out some coded message, while the ropes and stays became covered in a clinging crust of ice.

'Provisions are running out,' Gina reported to Captain Valentine. 'For starters today you can have water with soaked rusks; for main dish rusks soaked in water. And into the bargain the fresh water is down to a trickle in the barrel, and rusks are almost gone... Perhaps we should turn back, eh, captain?'

'Not on your life,' said Captain Valentine, gritting his teeth.

'Righty ho,' sighed the cook mysteriously. 'We'll starve for the time being, then we shall see...'

Goodness knows how it would all have ended had not *Dream* nearly run into an enormous round iceberg in the freezing mist the next morning. Incidentally, it was only huge in contrast to tiny *Dream*. In actual fact, a Polar bear and cub were having trouble squeezing onto it.

The mother bear was holding her cub tightly, gripping him with her broad paw to prevent him tumbling into the water.

At that moment Sou'wester happened to be on deck, massaging his trained Sardine's chilled scales.

'Just a bit more and I'll be freshly frozen,' Sardine was complaining bitterly. 'I'm frozen right through to my fishy marrow...'

'Where are you heading for?' the polar bear called to the sailors.

'Due north, to Lunch Break Archipelago, where else?' replied Sou'wester, sure of himself. He was shifting from one foot to another from the cold, blowing on his numb hands.

'Eek! To Lunch Break?' the bear cub cried out.

As he budged and fidgeted, his hind legs slid along the narrow edge of the ice floe. The mother Polar bear heaved a sigh and yanked him closer to her. The floe had almost turned turtle.

'Eek! Lunch Break Archipelago isn't to the north at all. It's due south!' said the bear cub, stammering in his excitement to explain.

'You are sailing straight for Slow Learner Island, then the North Pole is just a paws-length away!'

'Geography's his hobby,' said mother bear, deeply moved. 'What a clever lad he is! Just you tell Uncle Sailorman distinctly, don't rush...'

First Mate Senya reported all that had transpired to Captain Valentine.

'I too thought it lay somewhere in southerly latitudes,' added First Mate Senya.

'It's all very strange,' muttered Captain Valentine, poring over the map. 'It's an utterly incredible and puzzling business. You'd think that north and south had switched places on the map.'

And so, the good ship *Dream* altered course and went back the way it had come.

With every passing day it grew warmer and warmer, and big clear drops dripped from the melting stays and ropes. At long last the splendid Lunch Break Archipelago showed in the distance.

For three days the entire crew took a breather, bathing in the sunshine.

Then, after replenishing their stores with fresh water and filling the hold with musical bananas and jingling coconuts, the sailors climbed back on board the good ship *Dream,* their heads splitting from the unceasing noise.

They had had all the jingling they could bear.

Black Pussy seemed to have turned sootier, blacker than ever. She was now as black as night. She suffered worst of all, for on the very first day gluttony got the better of her and she swallowed live a tiny jingling mouse. The mouse went on whirring in her stomach without cease, for two days and two nights, for after all he hadn't asked to be swallowed in the first place.

The sailors could stuff their ears with cotton wool, and it was a mite better, but however much you fill your ears with cotton wool it doesn't help if it's your belly that's jangling.

On the third day Pussy gave in. Lying on the sandy shore, she

struck her belly with her paw and told the mouse to come on out as soon as he liked, and leave her in peace.

That Mousie, though, turned out to be crafty in the extreme. Before springing out he got Pussy to promise not to jump on him a second time while he was looking about and accustoming himself to the sunlight after the dark stomach.

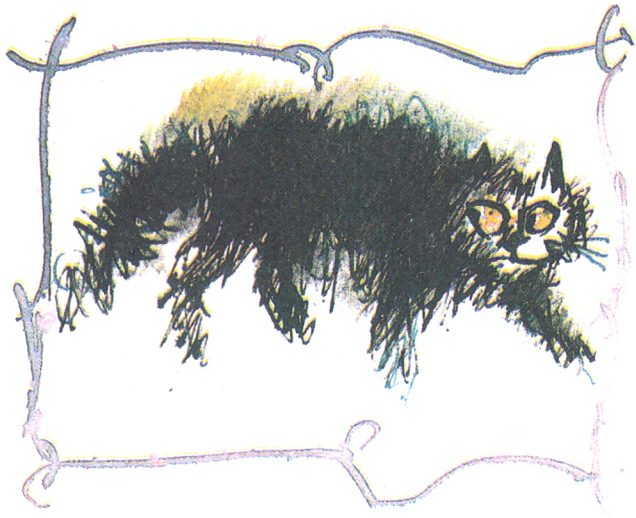
Black Pussy would have consented to anything. She vowed not to catch mice and their babies to the end of her days.

Thereupon Mousie told her to open her jaws wider, and he nimbly clambered out on to the sand. He gave himself a good shake, scratched himself, twitched his whiskers and politely wished Pussy a pleasant voyage before he went about his business with a careless jingle.

That was why Black Pussy was in such a testy mood.

Time passed. The bananas and coconuts became quieter and quieter down in the hold and soon stopped their jingle-jangle altogether. You would not have told them from common-or-garden bananas and coconuts.

Dream simply flew over the waves with the breeze filling her sails and whistling a merry tune.



Chapter 8

Chewing Gum and More: Two Oceans

The days went by one after the other. A steady trade-wind blew and for the time being the capricious Fairy Tale Ocean behaved itself uncommonly calmly and quietly.

Swallow Two Spots was feeling much better. He would make his way on to deck, sometimes even tried to fly and would make a few uncertain circles above *Dream*. But the scalded spot still ached a little and the Swallow complained that it was not yet handy at gliding and hanging on in the sky.

The Swallow and First Mate Senya had become firm friends, and whenever the sailor had a spare moment he would be sitting on a pile of ropes alongside his bosom pal.

First Mate Senya would tell the Swallow of his life and doings on Captains' Island, and he in turn divulged the ins and outs of his bird life.

'How hard it is these days to bring up painted children,' he would sigh. 'Judge for yourself. I can't say exactly when it was, this summer I think, my kids flew in through someone else's window. An open picture book was lying on the table, and what do you think happened?

Those vandals pecked all the painted beetles and butterflies from the pictures. Just imagine what a pickle that put me in. I had to go and apologise to the hosts.'

That morning the Swallow had made a long flight above *Dream* and had landed on deck tired but as pleased as punch.

'The spot gave me no bother today for the first time,' he chirped exhilarated. 'Well, perhaps it did on the steep turns, but only slightly.'

Out of the galley came Gina. She gave Swallow Two Spots a dirty look, leaned her elbows against the gunwhale and her shining, metallic black ringlets caught the ocean's indigo glitter. Warming her side, Black Pussy pressed close to her mistress, her triangular ears cocked.

'So that didn't work, we'll have to try something else,' hissed Gina through tightly-clenched teeth. 'We must cook up something a bit more spicy.'

'What a clever pussy I am,' breathed Black Pussy in praise of herself. 'Here I am working things out down to the last detail and making a cast-iron choice. Fairness and honesty are always the same. The same. But take deceit and cunning — they, my little darlings, are always different. For instance, today they're one thing, tomorrow they're altogether different.

'The eras-s-s-er!' hissed Gina.

'The eraser?' repeated Black Pussy puzzled.

'We'll destroy it. What'll they rub out the Line with then?'

Triumph flashed in Gina's dark eyes.

'The eraser must disappear.'

'But how can it ... disappear?' gasped Black Pussy, starting to tremble with excitement and curiosity.

'It will vanish unnoticed, gradually, like fading away...'

The pupils of Gina's eyes narrowed menacingly.

'And the main thing is that not a shadow of suspicion will fall on us. We'll remain absolutely pure, impartial. Yet the eraser will disappear. The sailors will ... eat it! Or rather chew it!'

'Purr-rr,' exclaimed Black Pussy unable to restrain herself.

She recoiled from her mistress and sat there rooted to the spot, her mouth open in astonishment. Although she could conceal her thoughts and feelings like nobody else, this time the famous sangfroid deserted her.

'Shhh!' hissed Gina, pressing a slender finger to her grinning lips.

Late that evening, seizing her chance while not a soul walked the deck, Gina sidled silently and slipperless into the hold.

She felt round in the darkness for the springy, smooth eraser. All of a sudden she trod on something sharp... Cursing everything under the sun, she set about carving off a bit of the rubber, trying to lop as much as possible from it.

She wrapped up the dismembered piece of the eraser in her apron and retreated without anyone noticing. Until early morning she boiled it in sweet cherry syrup.

And the next day...

'You're all probably fed up with the same old stodge. I've really put myself out for you today, and cooked such a tasty dish, such a delicious meal.' This she announced with her customary set smile. 'For pudding today we have chewing gum! Sweet and fragrant. Chew away, my hearties.'

The entire crew set to having a good chew.

The whole day through Black Pussy circled the deck chewing so hard her jaws began to ache. The sailors chewed as they climbed the rigging, First Mate Senya chewed as he kept his eye on the water compass, Bony the cabin-boy chewed away as he cleaned the anchor chain, he chewed and chewed and chewed.

'How about you, Captain?' asked Gina, offering him some with a sweet smile.

'No, thank you. I don't fancy it,' he said, somewhat embarrassed. 'By the way, where did you come by it?'

Gina apparently did not catch the question, for she made no reply and noiselessly slid from the cabin.

'Lovely grub. Yummie-yummie!' purred Black Pussy, blowing bubbles. The chewing gum had filled up the whole of her mouth and hung down from her whiskers.

'Chew away, my brave lads, chew away,' urged Gina in an insinuating voice as she wandered about the ship.

She even threw a piece of chewing gum into the barrel where the trained Sardine was swimming.

She tried long and hard to persuade the Swallow to take just a tiny bit in its beak.

By the second day it was clear the sailors were chewing gum less enthusiastically, with evident lack of zest.

And on the third day seaman Sou'wester spoke right out,

'I've had enough.'

At which all the other sailors followed suit and refused outright.

Only Bony the cabin-boy chewed the gum absently as he polished the anchor chain until it sparkled and shone. He really was the brightest and nimblest lad, yet so skinny and light that Captain Valentine had to lock him in his cabin during a storm for fear of a wayward wave washing him overboard.

'We won't get far on that bag-of-bones alone,' raved Gina as she banged the saucepans together. 'That plan's down the drain ... craftiness of the first water...'

'She'll have to come up with something else,' mused Black Pussy anxiously. 'Simply got to... Since I've already made my choice.'

'One night left, just one,' groaned Gina, grabbing the corners of her lace-embroidered white apron in a frenzy and tearing it from the bottom up with a ripping noise. '*Dream* is approaching the very edge of the Fairy Tale. I can feel all things becoming heavier and the air thicker. Curses! I'll have to risk it. The eraser must vanish. Into pieces with it and overboard!'

'What about the Painted One?' said Black Pussy dubiously. 'After all, she's on deck day and night. She'll notice and report it to the captain right away.'

The ship's cook beckoned Pussy to her, bent towards her black triangular ear with its pinkish inside and whispered something. The cat thought for a moment before nodding with a serious mien.

Scarcely had the velvet sky filled with big snowball-like stars than Black Pussy made her way noiselessly towards Swallow Two Spots. All over her face was written such a joyful expression you would have thought the two were bosom pals who had not seen each other for ages.

'Here we are sailing along together, yet with no time to bare our souls,' Pussy was purring in syrupy tones. Her eyes were round and flat, like two gold coins. And she squatted down alongside the Swallow and firmly put her paw around the bird's neck.

'What's there for us to talk about?' muttered Swallow Two Spots warily.

'Oh, this and that,' laughed Black Pussy quizzically in the dark. 'Take this, for instance: I'd like to know whether there are more mice or stars in the world. What do you think, eh? Mice, of course, we eat. To keep their number down. But perhaps star-eaters live somewhere in the world as well? Living on stars. One for dinner, another for tea. Drinking down a tasty star with a glass of wine. Do you know of such?'

'No, I don't,' said the Swallow with a shake of his head. He was trying to free himself unnoticed from the heavy stifling embrace. The crooked claws were unpleasantly caught on the soft little feathers of his unprotected neck.

'I don't sleep at night for wondering about it.' Pussy's voice had suddenly become sad and maudlin. 'It won't be long before I make myself ill. Could you give me a helping hand? Let's count together: you take the stars and I the mice. Eh?'

Black Pussy removed her hot paw from the bird's neck and gave a pleading purr.

'Very well,' agreed the Swallow without much enthusiasm.

'I shan't forget until the day I die,' exclaimed Pussy, brightening up. 'Main thing, don't forget: stars don't have tails. But mice, my

darling, they certainly have. Never mix up the two. Well, get down to work and don't rest until you've counted every last one.'

Black Pussy vanished easily and instantaneously into the dark.

The Swallow looked up to scan the sky.

The stars were spread out above the bird, either bunched in garlands or sprinkled across the heavens. It was hard to work out which edge to start counting from. Then the Swallow made up his mind: left to right, in order.

He counted and counted until he lost count and had to start again. All of a sudden, Swallow Two Spots froze. A star was tumbling and rolling through the sky, evidently unable to stop. It was bright, radiant, shooting a shower of sparks in all directions behind it, like a tail.

'A star-mouse! A star-mouse!' cried the Swallow in a strange voice, as he rushed off to find Black Pussy.

He searched the entire ship — but Black Pussy was nowhere to be seen. Quite by chance he looked down into the hold — and there in the corner mysteriously glittered two gold coins. Swallow bent down his head to call,

'A mouse-star! A mouse-star! Just imagine.'

He really was in a dither.

On the last step of the ladder leading into the hold, Swallow Two Spots could just about make out Black Pussy. And right next to her was the ship's cook in her tattered white apron.

'Is that you?' asked the Swallow in astonishment. 'What on earth are you doing down there?'

'Counting mice,' growled Black Pussy sullenly.

They were muttering together about something down there in the gloom. Then Black Pussy flew up the stairs in two leaps. The ship's cook followed close behind. The Swallow noticed she had nothing on her feet, she was holding her slippers in her hand. As she passed, Gina flashed the Swallow a hostile look.

It all seemed most peculiar to the Swallow. He sat until morning on the deck, gazing at the angular, agile moon tirelessly moving

in the wake of the good ship *Dream*, from time to time shaking droplets of mist from his wings.

Yet the sun rose from the sea so scrubbed and clean. Its rays penetrated the translucent waves right to the sea bed. You could see fish swimming along in wavy shoals and the still sleepy crabs twisting their bulging eyes round to inspect *Dream*'s tarred bottom.

Swallow Two Spots grew warm and happy, his anxious thoughts dispersed along with the night mist.

Unexpectedly something big and round flashed deep under the waves: it was pink on top with green veins down the sides. It began to rock slightly as it rose to the surface, then suddenly there it was: looking very much like a pink whale with green stripes.

'Hide-and-Seek Island! Hide-and-Seek Island! Straight ahead!' cried Swallow Two Spots in exultant tones. He flew off the poop so fast that *Dream* rocked and her nose rode up sharply out of the water.

The entire crew crowded to starboard. Even among the most experienced sailors few had had the good fortune to clap eyes on Hide-and-Seek Island. A ship only had to appear on the horizon and the playful island would sink into the water with a mocking gurgle.

Rumour had it that Hide-and-Seek Island was covered with filigree coral caverns, with seaweed on the trees instead of leaves.

Yet no matter how hard sailors gazed into the distance they would see only blue waves lightly rolling over blinding sunspots, just as if the sun was baking golden pancakes and tossing them upon the waves. In the meantime the fickle Hide-and-Seek Island would disappear from view without a trace.

'There it is! Over to port! Look lively, look lively!' the Swallow called in a piercing voice from on high.

Everyone rushed to port.

For an instant they could see the pink coral arbours intertwined with flowing seaweed. Next they heard merry giggling, then lapping, and all disappeared.

'One way or another, the cherished Line is not far off,' said Captain Valentine pensively. 'How is your sore little spot, Swallow? You'll have fly and show us the way.'

'All's fine, Captain, never fear,' replied the Swallow. He was trying to keep calm, though clearly something was bothering him.

On instructions from Captain Valentine, they brought up the eraser out of the hold. Six sailors humped it on to the deck with some difficulty.

'Someone's been whittling it with a penknife, cheep-cheep,' said Bony the cabin-boy innocently.

'That's funny,' observed First Mate Tops'l Senya, 'I don't get it... You'd think someone really had chipped off a chunk from this side. I wonder who could have done it?'

The ship's cook flitted out onto the deck more lightly than a bird, wearing her inimitable, unchanging smile. The white apron was neatly darned and sewn.

'What do you think you were chewing, my hearties? And now you deny it! That's not nice!'

She shook her head reproachfully.

'You kept asking me for more and more, just a little bit. As for you, Sou'wester, you should be ashamed of yourself. You went on your knees for a third piece.'

'Really? I don't recall that,' spluttered the simple-hearted Sou'wester in amazement.

'How ridiculous! You should not have done it without my permission,' said Captain Valentine with an angry frown. 'Well, there's nothing to be said now.'

'You do your best for everyone, and that's the thanks you get,' muttered Gina offended, as she turned away. 'After all, I meant well. Let's cheer them up, I was thinking to myself. Something different on the menu.'

The closer *Dream* came to the Drawn Line, to the edge of Fairy Tale, the more capriciously the ocean was behaving.

The wind blew in uneven gusts. The waves embellished in white, sugar-like crests reared up into the air.

'It's getting nervous,' explained Swallow Two Spots, descending to the deck for a moment. 'Incidentally, this is quite common in these latitudes. Fairy Tale comes to an end somewhere around here. Over there ... there beyond the Drawn Line, everything is entirely different.'

By midday a heavy, dove-grey storm-cloud tinted crimson covered the whole sky. It turned dark and stuffy.

The storm-cloud descended so low its edges were clutching at the mainsail and hanging from the stays in misty tentacles.

Enormous waves reared over *Dream*: it was like a giant tossing the weightless boat from one hand to the other. A violent shuddering shook *Dream* to the very tips of her masts.

'Look at that,' said Captain Valentine to First Mate Senya, pointing to the compass needle.

The compass needle was doing some wild dance, violently tilting first one way, then the other. That was hardly surprising. After all, fairy tale North and South by no means coincide with the real North and South.

'Oh my, I feel wretched, I want to go home,' groaned Black Pussy.

Her eyes were gleaming in the mist like green smoking torches.

'I can see it. The Drawn Line!' came the indistinct voice of the Swallow from somewhere up above; the wind seemed to crumple and rumple his voice, bearing it off somewhere.

And all of a sudden the good ship's frame received a blow of monstrous force as if *Dream* had been driven on to underwater rocks. As Captain Valentine bent over the side he could make out through the gloom and bubbling patches of foam a dark, unmoving band straight ahead of them.

It lay there absolutely still and straight, and even the unruly waves were unable to budge it one little bit — it was beyond their power.

Then a fresh ruthless crack. The masts bent with a creaking. The keel groaned loudly.

'It'll smash us to smithereens! To tiny pieces!' squealed Black Pussy in anguish. 'I don't want to go down. You've no right. Full steam to stern, my hearties. I'll disclose all secrets to you, all the plots.'

Thereupon Pussy let out a piercing wail and fell silent. The white apron of the ship's cook flashed in the gloom.

'Let down the eraser. Pronto!' yelled Captain Valentine.

There was not a moment to lose. The waves were buffeting the ship with devastating force against the Drawn Line. The pulleys wheezed, the steel hawsers turned and the eraser was wound down on a block and tackle.

'I'll have to do it myself,' muttered the captain.

And, without a word, he nimbly leapt over the gunwhale and plunged down into the foaming, seething watery pit.

As a wave picked up *Dream,* everyone could see him standing on the eraser, his legs wide apart, his hands firmly gripping the ropes.

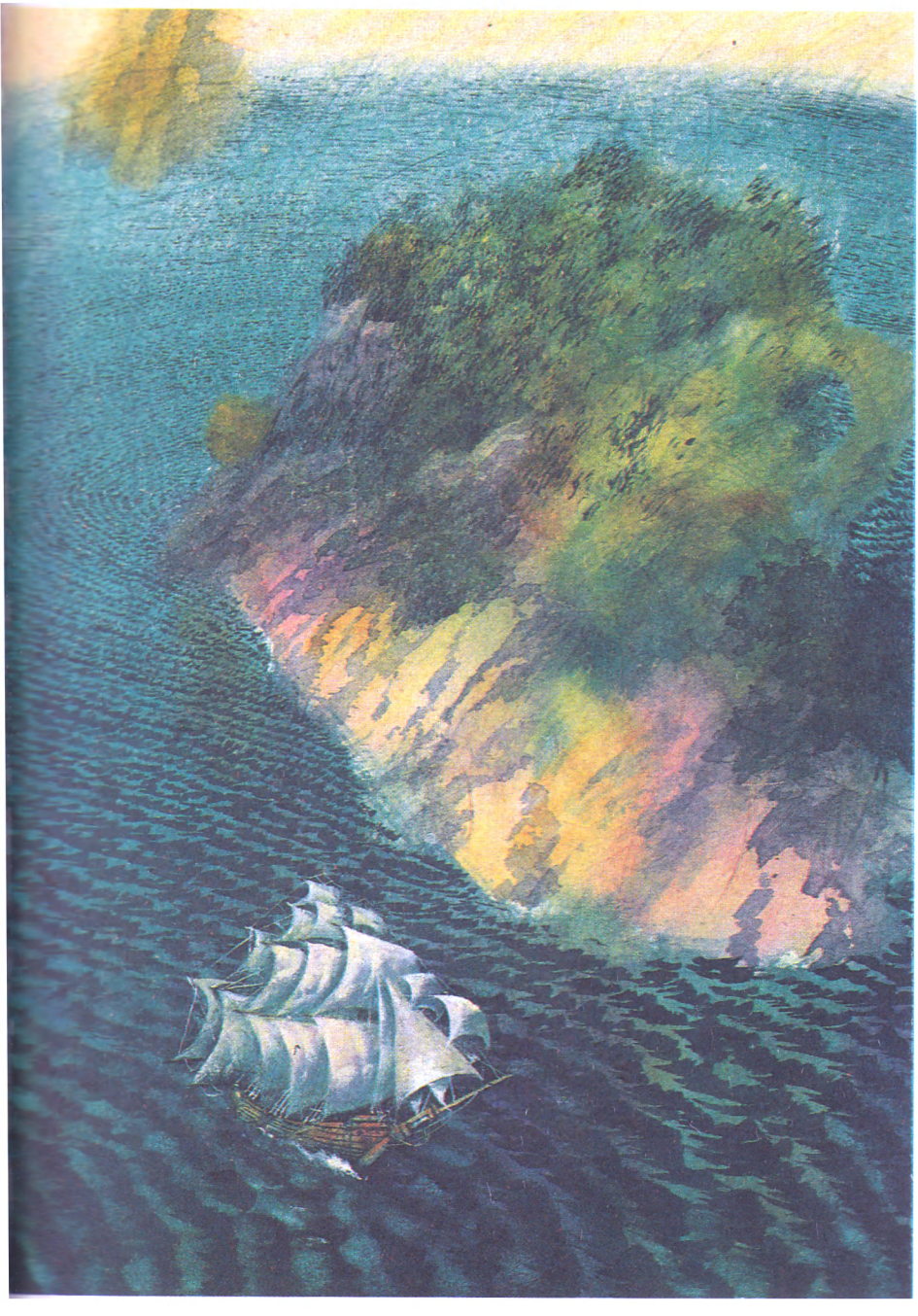
'Lower her down, go on,' he was shouting.

Finally the eraser bounced against the black band.

The waves were bobbing it up and down, and the eraser, began sliding springily along the Drawn Line. For an instant it seemed that the black band would not give, and all hopes would be dashed, it had all been in vain. Yet a moment later Captain Valentine saw with bated breath that the Drawn Line was melting beneath the eraser, and black slivers went racing through the waves all curled up like singed birch bark.

'It's giving,' shouted Captain Valentine.

And with every motion of the eraser the gloom above *Dream* seemed to be dispersing, the heavens grew light and pink, the breeze died down. Patches of sunlight pushed their way through the rents in the storm clouds.



The gap in the black band was becoming wider and wider.

Just a few more noiseless, light movements of the eraser ... and there was the good ship *Dream* carefully edging her way into the passage that she had made.

Yes, *Dream* had passed the Drawn Line!

The edges of the Drawn Line scraped along *Dream*'s planking with a tinny sound that set one's teeth on edge, stripping the paint.

Swallow Two Spots, happy, weary, covered in tiny drops of moisture, fluttered down to the deck.

'So we've thrust our way through,' he chirped all out of breath. 'There may be other ways of leaving Fairy Tale, but I assure you: this isn't the hardest...'

As Captain Valentine glanced round, the Drawn Line had nearly vanished from view. All around, no matter where you looked, the tranquil sea gleamed a deep royal blue. And the sun's rays seemed to be combing the water, planting a golden comb into every wave.

Chapter 9

Alex the Magician Again and More: Captains' Island Should Have a Lighthouse

Aye, mateys, it's pleasant to tread on dry land once more. How grand it is to walk up your familiar street, past familiar trees, your silent friends, towards the only house whose window greets you with a warm, welcoming glow.

But here I am getting carried away. I'm about to tell you about something quite different.

I reckon you've guessed already: I'm about to tell you about our friend Alex the Magician.

So here we go: Alex the Magician.

Sad to say, Alex had caught a cold and had been home for three days. He was clad in a warm dressing gown, thick, rather wiry, woollen socks and deep cosy slippers. All the same, he was chilled to the bone.

'This is a fine howdoyoudo, this cold. As they say, sneeze for seven days if you don't do anything about it. Sneeze for a week if you do. But if you resort to magic spells you'll still be sneezing a week, or seven days, whichever you prefer. Nothing can be done about it.'

Those were Alex's gloomy thoughts as he felt for a handkerchief in his pocket.

'And now I've had such a peculiar dream.'

He had not had a wink of sleep all night, he'd been coughing, tossing and turning. He had got up, drank some hot milky tea, then lain down again. He'd only dropped off towards morning. And then, all at once, he had had an unusual, even mysterious dream.

He had dreamed of Swallow Two Spots.

Not that there had been anything unusual in that. It was not the first time. When the Swallow had to communicate something in a hurry to Alex he simply appeared in his dreams and told him the news. Alex himself had taught him that clever magic trick.

But this time the Swallow was all of a dither, exceedingly worried.

He was circling above a small white-sailed brig on whose side the name *Dream* was painted in blue.

'You must be at home without fail,' the Swallow kept on insisting. 'Without fail, or else...'

Then a pretty black-haired woman had appeared. She wore a white apron, had dark, smouldering eyes and a fixed, seemingly frozen smile upon her lips. In an instant everything grew dark, the wind began to wail and the little ship disappeared behind heavy bottle-green waves. Showers of foam flew through the air like white birds crushed by the gale. And all the while, without cease, through the wailing and splashing of the wild wind and waves, Alex could hear the feeble, stuttering voice of the Swallow.

'You must be home... Certainly... Without fail...'

'A funny dream, most peculiar,' thought Alex again anxiously. 'It's probably because I had a high temperature last night. That's the solution. And the Swallow had no intention of appearing in my dream. I must wrap up more warmly and somehow get to the chemist's. At least buy myself some aspirins. Take one at night. And yet, if the Swallow really did appear in my dream and was begging me to stay put, what then? How could the Swallow have given me such a muddle-headed, even irresponsible dream? 'Pon my word, it was more a right pickle than a dream. Maybe I should send the genie to the chemist's? No, there'd only be trouble from that, as always. The genie,

you can bet your boots, would be ticking off the manager, offending all the customers, taking the mickey out of all the antibiotics and sulphamides... No, you have to resort to the genie's services only in extremis. Don't you think so? Certainly!'

Alex gave a loud sneeze.

'Bless you,' said Striped-Cat Vaska gravely and haughtily. He was sitting on the table by the lamp, patiently waiting for Alex to switch it on. Like all cats in the world, he liked warming himself and even dozing in the soft cosy light of the desk lamp.

I wish to remind you: Vaska was Alex's favourite pupil. Hard-working and diligent. Conscientious and assiduous. So you can reckon he too was as good as a real magician.

Some time ago Vaska had simply been a painted cat, hanging on the wall in a frame. Then Alex had brought him to life.

For some reason Vaska was not fond of recalling his past; he was embarrassed about it. Though, if you ask me, there's nothing to be ashamed of in being painted. Anyway, one way or another, it may be for that, or maybe not, but he was not terribly fond of Swallow Two Spots.

'I am a cat, for heaven's sake. Maybe I was once painted in the past, still I'm a cat. And no one would dare deny it,' Vaska would reason, with pride. 'And that Swallow looks at me in too familiar a manner. It's as if he's thinking: you and I are just the same, mate. Now that's going much too far...'

Alex frowned, wrinkled his nose and sneezed once again.

'You sneeze, you cough,' said Vaska disapprovingly. 'We cats prefer to yawn. Sometimes it's so pleasant yawning. Especially if you have a stretch at the same time.'

Vaska could not restrain himself and gave a sweet yawn.

'You humans catch colds because you do not get out enough. I'm quite convinced of that.'

He continued his edifying discourse.

'Yes, yes, don't go giving me those dirty looks. If you weren't so bone idle, and came crawling on the rooftops with me of an evening,

and sat about on the fence a bit more, you'd forget all about colds.'

'What a cheek!' exclaimed the magician quite vexed. 'You can just keep your advice to yourself. I know full well what to do. I should now be taking an aspirin and getting my head down a bit earlier.'

'An aspirin,' spluttered Vaska scornfully. 'Chemistry! It's rooftops you need, that's what. At any rate, Murka and I will be waiting for you there. The right-hand chimney by the television aerial. Just see what a super full moon is out. The spitting image of a saucer of silvery cream.'

At that moment something began tapping insistently at the window, as if someone had tossed a handful of shingle against the glass.

'It's Two Spots. Talk of the devil,' blurted out Vaska. 'Come flying here probably to see his fledgelings. Why bother? I don't go chasing them.'

Alex wrapped his dressing gown about him, holding on to his collar with one hand, ran to the window and let Swallow Two Spots into the room.

In greeting, the Swallow lightly touched his cheek with its beak.

'First—how are my children?' he twittered excitedly.

'All fine. Hale and hearty,' said the magician hastening to reassure the bird. 'They're so big already and fly simply marvelously.'

Every year the Swallow flew by to raise a family in his home town. It would not be long before there would be chattering and merry twittering in the round little nest beneath the roof.

One thing alone worried the solicitous Swallow: two black little spots noiselessly followed each fledgeling through the air. The moment they popped out of the egg—lo and behold, each of them had two tiny round spots, and nothing would get rid of them.

The fledgelings would be arguing in the nest,

'You stepped on my little spot!'

'I'll give your spot such a peck in a minute, just see if I won't.'

'Dad, he keeps saying his spot's better than mine.'

All the same, at the bottom of his heart, Father Swallow was

proud of his fledgelings. When they would dip low over the tarmac before the rain, their wings were like little black crescents. And two black round spots would fly through the air in their wake.

No matter what else you might say, Father Swallow had no trouble distinguishing his children from all the others.

'Thank you, thank you,' said the Swallow, nodding several times. 'You can tell me about that in more detail later. Now, I beg of you, open the door quickly.'

'The door?' said Alex in amazement. 'I didn't hear anyone ring the bell.'

'How can they ring the bell!' exclaimed the Swallow. 'I don't know how they're going to climb the stairs, as it is. Come downstairs, quickly, I beg of you.'

The magician wasted no more time on questions. He opened the door and, losing his slippers but clutching hold of the flaps of his dressing gown, he rushed headlong down the steps.

Vaska the Cat scurried after him.

They met on the first-floor landing.

Permit me to say, mateys: you're quite wrong if you suppose that grown-ups are never surprised by anything. You probably think they somehow lost the habit gradually as they grew up. And magicians especially.

That is absolutely wrong, I assure you. What is more, I can tell you in all sincerity: if a magician were to lose the knack of being surprised, it's a sure sign he should change his job quickly and never be a magician again.

So, as you now realise, there is nothing strange in the fact that Alex was astonished.

He squatted down and adjusted his glasses with a trembling hand.

'Please excuse me looking like this,' he said in an embarrassed voice, pulling the hem of his dressing gown over his knees. 'You see, I'm in my home things. And I've caught a bit of a cold as well. If I'm not mistaken, you must be Captain Valentine.'

'Aye,' replied Captain Valentine. 'And this, if you please, is seaman Sou'wester and his renowned talking Sardine. She fancied taking a look at the city, you see. The rest of the crew has stayed on board.'

Having caught sight of the enormous striped cat, the trained Sardine involuntarily clung even closer to Sou'wester, beating her tail against his elbows as if warning him to hold her tighter, just in case.

'Oh, don't be scared,' said Swallow Two Spots, flying downstairs and settling on the banisters. 'That cat is very nice. What is more, he is exactly like me—painted.'

'What do you mean? Like you... Come off it,' snorted Vaska the Cat into his whiskers in an offended manner.

With haughty mien he lifted up his tail and skipped up the stairs, one step at a time.

He could not forgive Swallow that indiscretion for a long time.

Alex bent down and carefully put Captain Valentine and Sou'-wester on the palm of his hand.

'In the lift?' asked the magician hesitantly.

'That'll do nicely. I take an interest in technology,' said the trained Sardine with dignity.

And so they all went up by lift. Everyone, that is, save the offended and vexed Vaska who had made straight for the rooftop. Even there he took some time to get over the affront. He could not even share his hurt with his friends. The vain cat had kept the secret of his being painted from all the rooftop prowling enthusiasts.

Showing his guests into his room, Alex apologised once again, this time for the mess. He hastily pushed aside books on the table and made a little room.

'Tea?' he proposed, wondering from what cups he was to serve tea to his unusual guests.

'Thank you, we've only just had some,' said Captain Valentine. 'But she,' he pointed to the trained Sardine, 'could certainly do with a drop of water.'

Alex hurried off to the kitchen to fetch some water, and fed the Sardine out of a spoon.

The embarrassment gradually subsided. The Sardine drank her fill and became quite chatty. She said how fascinating the city was: such great houses, cars, lifts and suchlike. All the same, things were better on Captain's Island. She had become accustomed to Fairy Tale Ocean, and she'd be loath to lose touch with her various swimming companions and relatives.

'Of course, it's not easy to surprise me!' Alex said excitedly. 'My job, you know... Turning people into things, spells, and all that sort of thing. But all the same, you must agree, to have you all here, to see you in my house... Pardon me, I'm flummoxed.'

'Indeed?' said Captain Valentine with a polite smile.

But a slight shadow flitted across his face—whether from disillusion or chagrin I cannot say.

'I personally don't find anything special in that,' he said. 'Yes, we are captains of children's dreams... Captains' Island... Splendid lot of folks have gathered there, I can tell you. Of course, each has his own quirk and character, but what faultless courage, nobility... Christopher Columbus alone is worth his weight in gold.'

'Christopher Columbus?'

'The very man. As our old Admiral is fond of saying: "I'll be amongst you, my fellows, as long as true salts remember me." '

'Oh and by the way,' added Alex, breaking in, 'no later than this very day your Valentine came running to me. He gathered up all my books on Christopher Columbus.'

'I was about to ask you about him,' said Captain Valentine, markedly anxious. 'But I wasn't sure that I should, you know. How is he? Not gone cool, not taken up something else?'

'What? No, no. He's simply delirious about the sea.'

'It could hardly be otherwise,' said Captain Valentine quietly, giving a thoughtful smile.

The magician made some very strong coffee. But, as he feared, he had nothing to serve it in.

There was a thimble, but it got so hot from the coffee and it was impossible to drink from it; it burned their lips. Besides, the

thimble had no handles. And it gave the coffee a sort of metallic taste.

'This is probably that extreme case when I can't get by without the genie's aid,' muttered Alex anxiously. 'What do you think? Oh, indubitably.'

Catching sight of Captain Valentine, Sou'wester and the trained Sardine, the genie was thrown into extreme excitement. His eyes began to blaze like red hot coals, and he let out an arrogant guffaw.

'What do you know about fairy tales?' he thundered. 'Upstarts, ignoramuses! You need sweeping right out of fairy tales, all and every one.'

Alex pulled him up, ordering the genie to keep a civil tongue in his head. At that the genie became sulky, but did not fall silent. He remarked that he saw no Captain Valentine or Sou'wester, that they weren't there, and so there was absolutely no point in bringing in the coffee service and handing round coffee.

At last he flew off somewhere and returned with the tiniest little cups from the slenderest china.

'The whole universe, O master, contains none smaller than these,' the genie declared with a hint of pride.

'What do you mean, the whole universe,' said Alex, unable to resist a dig. 'You can get them in any toy shop, even smaller.'

To prevent the genie from interrupting their conversation, he sat him down with coloured pencils to draw some flies for Swallow Two Spots. Yet he soon got bored with this job and asked to be put back in his vacuum flask.

Alex and Captain Valentine sat chatting deep into the night.

The trained Sardine happily swam about a cup of water, inspecting the table lamp, the television set and the bookshelves. Meanwhile the exhausted Sou'wester curled up on the end of magician Alex's fluffy scarf and went to sleep.

Captain Valentine talked of life on Captains' Island. Alex already knew quite a lot from Swallow Two Spots. But pirates! That was news!

No matter how he tried to stop himself, the magician kept sneezing loudly. As he did so he covered his nose with a check handkerchief. The last thing he wished to do was to give his cold to Captain Valentine, to infect a fairy tale with a cold. There can surely never have been such a case.

However, he could soon feel the cold going of its own accord. It was perhaps because he had learned so much that was new and astonishing. He was growing warm, even hot.

May it not be, my friends, that the best way of curing a cold is to grow properly astonished?

Captain Valentine was smoking his ancient time-worn pipe. Tiny blue smoke rings were twisting lightly through the air as they floated up to the ceiling.

He was telling Alex about young Captain Tommy, and his ship made of palm wood.

'You see, that's the reason I'm here, I've made the trip to ask your advice,' Captain Valentine said.

The magician was deep in thought.

Pirates. Night. Darkness... What can be done?

'That's it! Captains' Island needs a lighthouse,' he exclaimed happily. 'A lighthouse. That's it. Then ships will not lose course even at night in the dark.'

'Why not? Excellent idea,' said Captain Valentine with interest. But he hastily added with some doubt, 'Well, yes, but what are we going to make it from? We, you know, aren't yet at such a high technical level.'

'There could be nothing simpler,' said Alex with a smile. 'I have a really first-class pocket torch. You take it with you to Captains' Island. It will make an excellent lighthouse.'

'Then don't let's lose time,' said Captain Valentine, jumping up from the matchbox on which he was sitting. 'What's more, I need to be back as quickly as possible on *Dream*. True enough, we were fairly lucky in our mooring. We tied up next to a cutter. But everything's so vast here. Just a chance wave of an oar...'

Alex said nothing. He was on his knees, rummaging in a drawer of his desk at the same time as he was trying to fumble inside the bedside locker.

'Here it is,' he exclaimed in triumph, taking out of the drawer a bright torch with bulging glass. To try it out he switched it on and off a few times. The torch gave out a steady, reliable light.

'I'll just get changed, have a quick shave and...' said the magician as he scraped up an armful of clothes and headed for the bathroom.

'But you've got a cold, haven't you?' shouted Captain Valentine after him. 'Maybe you'd be better staying at home?'

'Fiddlesticks,' came back Alex's voice. 'It would do me the world of good to crawl about rooftops and sit on fences... I mean, to get some fresh air.'

'What did I tell you? He's a darn good fellow,' said the Swallow, making circles beneath the ceiling and peering into the mirror as he did so. 'Oh my, what's that? Two spots flying behind me, and another two spots in the mirror. Does that mean my spots have doubled? That would be too much.'

But Captain Valentine calmed him down on that count.

'It's getting light. We must hurry,' said Alex, appearing in the doorway, freshly shaven, wearing a sober dark suit with a striped tie... But in his slippers.

'What are we going to travel in though? We must make up our minds, fellows: genie or taxi?'

He thought for an instant, tapping his fingers on his lips doubtfully.

'Genie or taxi, genie or taxi, genie or taxi,' he kept repeating, unable to make up his mind. 'No, we must resort to the genie only in extremis. Especially as he still has to take back the coffee service. Goodness knows where he laid hands on it. Therefore it must be taxi.'

'Boom!' the old clock rang out with a solemn chime.

'I thank you,' said Alex with a bow towards the clock. 'It's trying to remind me of something. But what? What can it be? Oh yes. I forgot to put on my shoes and all but went out in my slippers. I just don't know what I'd do about my absent-mindedness if it weren't for that

wise old clock. I'll tell you another thing: it's amazingly well-mannered. If I'm sleeping it won't wake me up; it keeps a tactful silence. You just listen to it ticking away: tick-tact, tick-tact.'

The taxi departed from the magician's house fifteen minutes later.

Truth to tell, the taxi driver had to keep himself in full check not to look back instead of forward; he so wanted to have another look at his passengers. They certainly were a rum bunch!

Swallow Two Spots was sitting on the magician's shoulder, timidly shivering and pressing his smooth little head to his cheek. He was not quite feeling right, since this was his first ride in a taxi.

On his other shoulder sat Captain Valentine and seaman Sou'wester, snuggling close.

In the meantime Alex was holding with his two hands a bowl of water in which the trained Sardine was swimming. His hands were simply numb with tension. He was trying to hold the bowl steady, but whenever the taxi braked, water from the bowl splashed out and ran down his legs. In addition, the wise Sardine, though striving to keep her dignity, kept thrusting her head out of the bowl to ask:

'What's that? And that? And what's that: that coloured thing that keeps blinking?'

One way or another they managed to arrive safely.

Captain Valentine sighed with relief, for the good ship *Dream* was peacefully bobbing up and down on the waves.

He introduced Alex to First Mate Tops'l Senya and *Dream*'s entire crew.

Alex only missed meeting the ship's cook and Black Pussy. Pretty little Gina had suddenly developed a toothache which prevented her even from leaving her cabin. All one could hear were indistinct moans and dull curses emanating from the cabin. Black Pussy, it goes without saying, stayed put beside her mistress, looking after her, consoling her, patting her with her paw.

'A pity, a pity,' said the magician thoughtfully, 'I'd like so much to have made her acquaintance. And Black Pussy too, I'd love to have

seen her. I'd have had something to tell my own cat Vaska. Otherwise he thinks there's no one better than his friend Murka...'

Magician Alex gave the sailors a hand putting the torch into the hold. Then Captain Valentine issued final instructions.

'Well now, what shall I wish you, my dear Captain?' said Alex anxiously. 'Good luck! Fair winds! All will be well, I'm certain of that.'

Alex carefully shook the Captain's small but firm hand. The good ship *Dream* weighed anchor and, hoisting the sails, went rocking and sailing on its way, tacking skilfully in the morning sunlight between the cutter and the grey hulk of some great ship.

The white sails melted away into the distance and then, all of a sudden, the first rays of the morning sun illuminated them for an instant, as if filling them with a golden breeze.

Another moment and *Dream* had vanished from sight.

Swallow Two Spots circled above the magician before landing upon his hand, then climbing up his index finger.

'Maybe I should fly with *Dream*,' he said in anxious tones. 'I'll just see the ship on its way to the Fairy Tale Ocean... As for the children... Of course, the quicker they become independent the better. It's a harsh life with cats all about. But do keep an eye on them while I'm away.'

'I'll visit them and I'll feed them, don't you worry,' said Alex, comforting the bird.

Swallow Two Spots nudged magician Alex's cheeks with its cold, smooth little head in farewell, before flying after the good ship *Dream*.

Chapter 10

A Cup of Coffee for Zest and More: Gina Just-Give-Us-A-Smile

As Captain Valentine had imagined, *Dream* sailed over the Drawn Line without so much as a tiny bump. They encountered dawn already in Fairy Tale Ocean; the weather was grand, with a light following breeze. All the talking herring chorused a happy welcome.

The muddle-headed fish got themselves all in a tangle: instead of crying 'Hello', they shouted 'To-do-loo' and 'Happy Voyage to the Bottom', which turned the touchy Sou'wester's cheeks bright red. He let the trained Sardine into the water where she soon lost her staid and unruffled manner. Overjoyed, the Sardine set to dancing in the waves in the company of the herring, kicking up foam and fountains of spray, her glittering scales flashing in the sun. You would have thought someone was stirring up the waves with a silver spoon.

'Aren't you ashamed of yourself? You're as bad as the herring,' called Sou'wester, trying to reason with his Sardine.

'Don't bother,' said Captain Valentine, stopping him. 'Let her have her fun. We should be home within the week given a fair wind.'

Onto the deck came the ship's cook, walking lightly over the boards. Who would not have admired pretty little Gina at that moment? Her long black curls were like twisted black candles with a silver sheen. The thick eyelashes softened the taunting gleam of her flashing eyes. And she was smiling. She was smiling, as always, in her set way.

Gina was holding a coffee pot with both hands. And out of the pot's spout poured a swirling cloud of steam. The sea breeze seemed to be an inveterate coffee drinker itself as it greedily snatched up the fragrant smell and bore it over the waves.

Behind the cook skipped Black Pussy, on this occasion having tied on, like her mistress, a white lace-edged apron. In her paws she was carrying coffee cups. Her green eyes gleamed so much the silver tray had one side all shot with green.

'Turn out the glow', hissed Gina to her.

In a flash Pussy's eyes lost their glow and became yellow and tranquil.

'We've already treated the crew,' said Gina with a smile. 'This is for you, a trifle stronger.'

'How are your teeth? No more aches?' politely asked Captain Valentine.

'I've never had a twinge since I was born...' the ship's cook began, then caught herself, let out a groan and clapped her hand to her cheek.

'Oh, how they ached, such a nagging pain, I could hardly bear it. It's better now.'

Gina poured coffee into the cups. Black Pussy, without spilling a drop, offered the cups to Captain Valentine and First Mate Tops'l Senya with a courteous bow.

'Excellent coffee. I thank you,' said the Captain, sipping his coffee.

'How about you, dear Swallow?' called Gina gaily. 'Why not try half a cup, with cream?'

'I don't drink even painted coffee,' replied Swallow Two Spots coldly.

'Oh, dear, you nurse a grudge too long,' said Gina with a reproachful shake of her head. 'Well then, I'll have to treat you to something else. Without fail... How about another cup, Captain?'

And straightaway she poured Captain Valentine another cup of thick, strong coffee.

'Yes, that Alex Secretman leaves a pleasant impression,' Captain Valentine was saying. 'It's good that such people exist on the earth. All the same two sleepless nights are beginning to take their toll. I feel so sleepy. Maybe I need another cup of coffee to put some zest into me?'

'Zest...' repeated First Mate Tops'l Senya with a sweet yawn as he sipped his coffee obligingly proffered by Black Pussy.

'Zest,' muttered Gina ingratiatingly.

'Zest...' whispered Pussy, giving her whiskers a slight twitch.

'There was a moment when I wavered,' Black Pussy was thinking to herself. 'But fortunately I soon changed my mind. Honesty and nobility always bode ill. No, I certainly made the right choice.'

'What's up with me? I'm properly falling asleep,' muttered Captain Valentine with an embarrassed smile. 'Maybe I should take another cup. What do you think?'

But First Mate Tops'l Senya made no answer. He gave another sweet yawn, his eyes closed sleepily, he tottered away, taking a few steps forward, grabbed hold of the mast and slowly slid to the deck.

Swallow Two Spots swiftly turned its narrow little black-capped head and stared anxiously at Captain Valentine, then at First Mate *Senya.*

'Don't drink, Captain! The coffee's poisoned!' he twittered.

But it was too late.

An insuperable drowsiness had come over Captain Valentine. His eyes had shut of their own accord.

No, those are no clouds, they are soft blankets and pillows. The

wind has rumpled them well and piled up for him. Oh to climb inside them head first and sleep, sleep, sleep...

'Would you like me to sing you a lullaby?' purred Pussy tauntingly.

Captain Valentine swayed, but managed to stay on his feet.

'Treachery, betrayal,' he muttered, his voice tailing away.

His head fell forward onto his chest, his knees buckled and he slid down to the deck alongside the heavily sleeping First Mate Senya.

'All the deck-hands are in the land of nod too,' reported Black Pussy happily.

'And so they should be. I sprinkled a sleeping powder in their coffee,' said pretty little Gina, unable to contain her wicked joy, as she looked at the lifeless, prostrate forms of Captain Valentine and First Mate Senya upon the deck. 'If it's less, it's more, and no bother!'

They tossed the remains of the drugged coffee overboard. A dozen or so talking herring that had been following in *Dream*'s wake soon fell silent, lost their tongues and no longer cursed the Sea Horse. Half an hour later their fins began to flap weakly and they sank to the sea bed. The herring lay like that on the soft wavy sand and peacefully slept for a whole day and night.

But don't let's get carried away.

'I must fly to Captains' Island and tell them all about it,' twittered the Swallow angrily.

He made a desperate attempt to fly, but some invisible, ruthless force was holding him down. Black Pussy could hardly stand on her four paws for laughing; she was tottering about the deck in splits.

'Ha, ha, ha. Come now, painted bird, can't you manage it?' Black Pussy jeered, holding her sides. 'That was me. I nailed your spots to the deck. A hammer and couple of nails. Tap-tap—all done. Ha, ha, ha.'

'Accursed smile! How I'm sick and tired of it!' exclaimed Gina in a voice bursting with emotion.

And then something incredible occurred. The Swallow thought he must be seeing things.

'Perhaps it's my eyes that are at fault? They are painted and so see what cannot be,' he was thinking to himself.

But no, his eyes had not betrayed the clever Swallow.

Pretty little Gina had raised her hand to her face, knitted her brows and all of a sudden ... with an effort she snatched from her lips the kind, tender smile.

Yes, yes. She ripped off her smile. The smile was not real, it had simply been stuck to her lips.

In fact, pretty little Gina had now revealed thin cruel lips.

With a gesture of disgust she tossed the smile overboard. And a rolling wave seized the smile and bore it off... The smile bobbed about in the water, slightly twisting at the edges. The wave now looked as if it was smiling.

'You were thinking I was just the tavern hostess? Bring me this, fetch me that! I'm the pirate chieftain. Notorious Gina, Gloomy Gina, Gina Just-Give-Us-A-Smile!' she yelled in triumph.

Chapter 11

Signore Mafioso Bandito and More: Little Luigi's Boat

At last Pirate Gina had laid her cards on the table. There's no getting away from it: she had tricked all the captains splendidly.

Gazing at her ever tender smile, at the modest white lace-edged apron, who could have imagined he was facing the notorious Pirate Gina, renowned for her cruelty?

Then how, you may ask, had she managed to get to Captains' Island? How could this have happened? How on earth had pirates come to roam the pure, boundless expanses of Fairy Tale Ocean?

Yes, mateys, it is an amazing story. It is a story that is hard to believe, even though it is true from start to finish. And I reckon all of you will be interested in hearing it. So here we go...

Signore Mafioso Bandito... No, perhaps it's better not to start with that.

The warm Mediterranean. Old fisherman Luigi.

In a tiny fishing village there once lived fisherman Luigi with his little son.

You might well think he was fishing for poverty and need. He

would cart his fish off to the neighbouring town, yet he got little for his pains. The fact is old Luigi's strength wasn't what it had been.

Luigi's little son who, incidentally, was also called Luigi, had one abiding joy: sitting at a rickety table, he would fondly model a little boat out of a block of pine. The cracked boards of the table had the pervading smell of fresh fish soaked in them and his father's sharp knife with its cracked handle was his trusty companion.

Little Luigi modelled a splendid little boat. Its finely-chiselled masts were so well shaped, its tall stern was embellished with skilful carving.

'My hands are like the pincers of an old crab,' his father would say, patting his son on the head and ruffling his tousled hair with his rough fisherman's hand. 'My fingers hardly bend enough to fill my pipe with tobacco. But you, sonny, have golden hands. Some day you'll become famous, my boy, just you see. Only how can I get enough money to give you an education?'

And then one day Signore Mafioso Bandito appeared in the doorway of the fisherman's hovel, shutting out the low evening sun. His sombre piercing stare would put the fear of the devil into anyone who owed him as much as a soldo. When Luigi saw him standing there in the doorway, he seemed as black as the ace of spades.

'It's the devil. The devil incarnate,' muttered the old fisherman, edging backwards.

Clutching hold of his sleeve was Signore Bandito's little daughter Gina. Her flashing black little eyes quickly took in the grimy walls and the low begrimed ceilings; and she involuntarily gathered up the hem of her silk skirt and pressed closer to her father.

'You're so much in debt to me that you'll never be able to pay me to the end of your days,' Signore Mafioso Bandito was saying with a look of disgust upon his face. 'I could have you thrown into gaol, but it wouldn't do me any good, would it? Anyway, I'm always glad to do someone a good turn. I'm a charitable man, saints preserve us, you can be sure of that. So all I'm going to do is confiscate your paltry little hovel. Well, and everything that goes with it, of course. So now

this is all mine, do you hear? I've already got my hands on the whole hamlet. These pitiful shanties should have been pulled down years ago. I'll build expensive hotels for the wealthy here. And the money will come pouring into my pockets, in streams, not trickles. So you can clear off with your urchin. Go on, push off. The sun's already setting. A thousand devils! I'm just too kind and compassionate, and I shall be bitterly regretting you wandering alone with a child at night down some dangerous dark lane.'

Old Luigi bent his head. He knew it was useless begging Signore Mafioso Bandito, seeking his sympathy, just as useless as it was for a poor man like himself to look for a gold coin in his pockets. What was the sense in seeking what was not there?

'Let's get out of here,' said little Luigi as if reading his father's thoughts. 'There's no sense begging this gentleman.'

The lad took his father by the hand; with the other he was clutching the little boat he had made.

Old Luigi sighed deeply and hoarsely. He made for the door, and it was clear that each step cost him dear.

'Father,' said Gina in a tiny voice, then fell silent.

'What is it, my little girl?' said Signore Mafioso Bandito, bending down to hear her.

'Father,' she repeated. Her gentle little face seemed to light up the low dark room. 'You said everything here was yours. Yes? Is that right?'

'Yes, my treasure, everything, everything is mine,' said Signore Mafioso Bandito nodding. 'Only don't soil your pretty frock, my child, it is so clean and smart, and everywhere here there's grime and fish scales.'

'Then why is he taking that away?'

Gina motioned to the wooden boat with her eyes. 'That should be yours as well.'

'What do you want some rubbishy little toy like that for?' said Signore Bandito with a curl of his lip. 'Don't you have enough expensive dolls?'

'I want the boat. I want it!' she said, giving her gleaming black curls a defiant toss.

'You're a dreamer, you are,' said Signore Bandito, smiling to his daughter.

And going up to little Luigi, he roughly snatched the boat from his grasp.

'Maybe this'll make you smile now, daughter?' he said. 'Just look at this little brute, see how his eyes blaze.'

But Gina was not smiling on this occasion either.

The girl never smiled, which at times somewhat worried her doting parents, Signore and Signora Bandito.

'Ginetta, our little dove, just give us a smile!' they would frequently say, trying to cheer her up.

All the same she never gave a smile.

Gina grabbed the boat and ran out of the dark fisherman's cottage. Meanwhile little Luigi could not help himself: he broke down in sobs and pressed his face to his father's old jacket, stiff and bitter from sea salt.

That evening Gina stuck a pirate's flag to the boat's mast. And she painted the skull and crossbones upon it. Signore Mafioso Bandito tiptoed up behind her and stood there at her back.

'What are you up to, my child? We haven't had a peep out of you all evening.'

'I'm now a pirate, Father,' the girl replied gravely. 'I sail the seven seas, plunder ships and grab everything that takes my fancy. That's what you do, anyway, Father, isn't it? You do it on land, I on sea.'

Signore Mafioso Bandito tenderly pressed his lips to Gina's buffon hairdo, so carefully she did not even feel it.

'You judge rightly, my treasure,' he said, obviously touched. 'If one were to divide up all the wealth equally, everyone would get a little bit. What good would that do? Much better for everything to be concentrated in one pair of hands. Mark my words, daughter: if it's less for others, it's more for us, and no bother. Those words jingle like gold coins. They have the gleam of gold and its weight.'

It was not long before Gina tired of the little boat, and she cast it into the corner on top of a pile of toys. And it was there that Signore Bandito's favourite young poodle rooted it out. The silly dog decided that boat had been made specially just to sharpen its teeth on.

And then, one fine day, Gina did recall the little boat and launched in into the sea, just as the tide was turning. The wind blew out the dirty, torn sails, and the skull and crossbones flapped defiantly an the masthead.

'Sail away, sail away, my little ship,' cried Gina after it. 'And let the pirates drink good rum upon your decks. Oh-ho-ho, what lovely knives they have. What fearful mugs! But they don't scare me though, because I'm the pirate chieftain, I, Gina Just-Give-Us-A-Smile.'

So now you know all there is to know, mateys. Now it's no secret how the pirates came to Black Island.

Little Luigi's boat, in whose bottom the silly poodle had gnawed a hole, had difficulty reaching Black Island and, once there, it ran aground on an underwater reef and immediately sank to the sea bed.

By the way, it's worth mentioning that throughout the voyage the pirates drank rum on the decks and sang their pirate songs instead of patching up the sails and mending the breach in the bottom. One way or another, the only thing they managed to save from the sinking boat was the flag with the skull and crossbones.

I should add that none of the captains even suspected that pirates had landed on Black Island. Chieftain Gina Just-Give-Us-A-Smile had stuck on her kind, tender smile, and spent her time stirring the coals in the hearth, roasting turkey and goose, and waiting her chance.

Now the time had come and the pirates had seized young Captain Tommy's ship, that splendid craft made out of palm wood.

Chapter 12

The Ship's Rat's Tale and More: Pirates Take Charge of Dream

Now then, mateys, what's been going on meanwhile on board the good ship *Dream?* How is our bold Captain Valentine and his First Mate Tops'l Senya, Sou'wester and trusty Swallow Two Spots?

Captain Valentine had great trouble opening his sleep-laden eyelids. The drowsy torpor only passed slowly. He made an effort to move but found, to his astonishment, that he could not budge an arm or leg.

Yes, the pirate chief and Black Pussy had certainly not wasted time. They had tightly bound all the sailors who had drunk the dosed coffee and fallen asleep right at table in the galley. One by one they had been dragged off and dumped in the hold.

Captain Valentine and First Mate Tops'l Senya, on the other hand, had been bound to the mast while they were helpless, weighed down by heavy sleep; their arms and legs had been mercilessly tied to the mast with ropes.

Swallow Two Spots had had to watch it all in terror and rage. How tormentingly hard it is to be unable to aid your friends in need. Not that his own plight was any the better.

'Meo-ouw, meo-ouw. The lads are coming!' cried Pussy joyfully, waving her paw.

A ship was fast approaching *Dream,* all her sails unfurled.

'Tommy's ship!' muttered Swallow Two Spots mournfully.

Captain Valentine looked up. One glance was enough to take it all in. Yes, it certainly was Tommy's ship. The splendid ship of golden palm wood, light, with sharp jibs. But... The mast flew the flag of shame, plunder and murder: the skull and crossbones.

The pirate ship came quite close so that the shadow of its sails overcast *Dream*'s deck.

But chieftain Gina did not smile. Not even now. Not even at her moment of triumph. All she did was take her pistols from the pockets of her darned apron, blew into them, then thrust them back into her pockets.

A gangway was slung across from the pirate ship. With shouts of 'Take!' 'Smash!' and 'Grab!' the pirates poured on board the good ship *Dream.*

Swallow Two Spots gave an involuntary shiver.

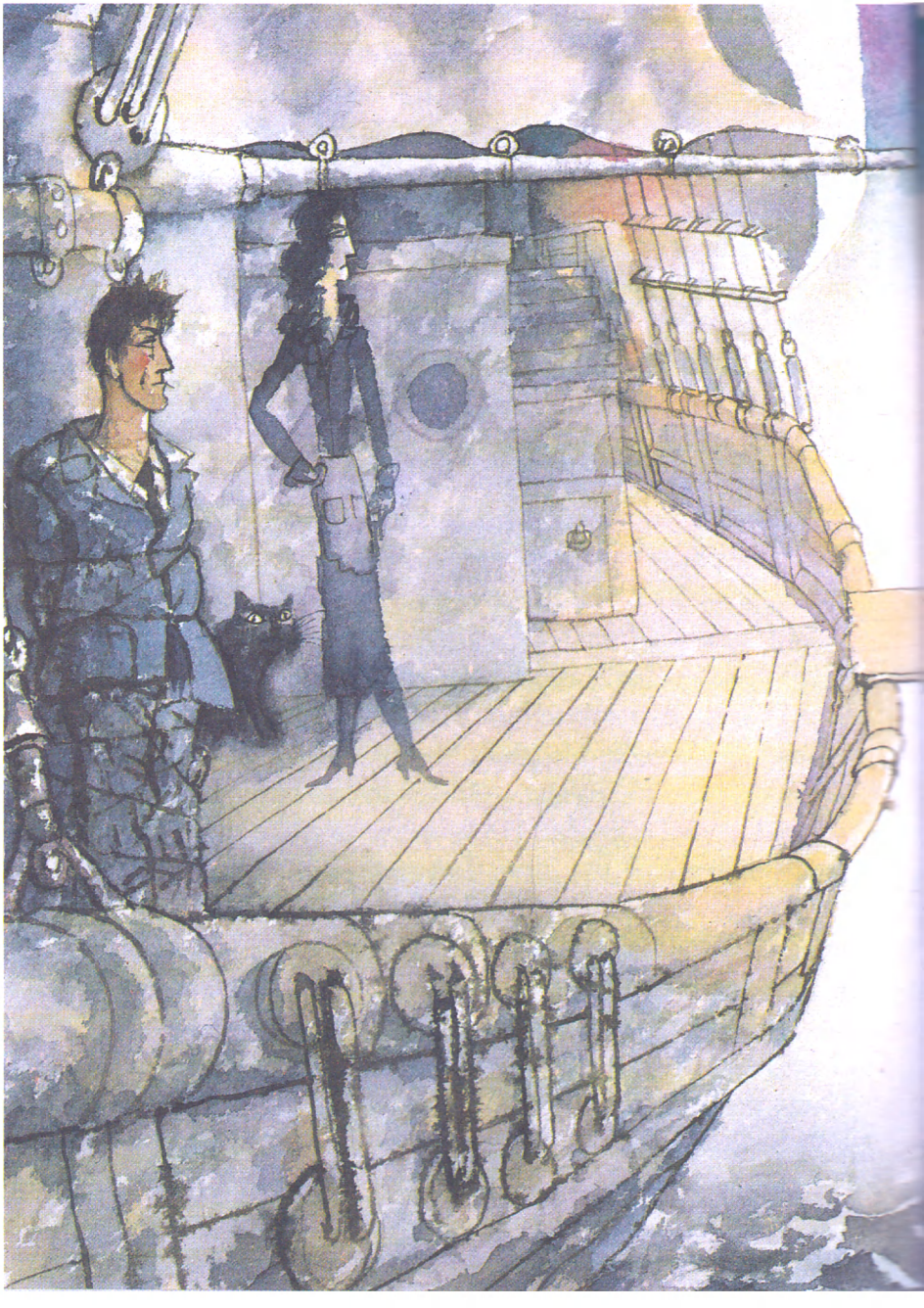
The first to board *Dream* was the one-eyed pirate; his only eye blazed with cruelty. Holding on to his belt came another pirate. It was Shorty. Everything about him was square: his head, his shoulders, elbows and knees. He was about the height of a five-year-old. But it was not that which depressed him: with every passing year he was somehow becoming smaller and smaller. You could say he was growing down instead of up. And that turned him nasty.

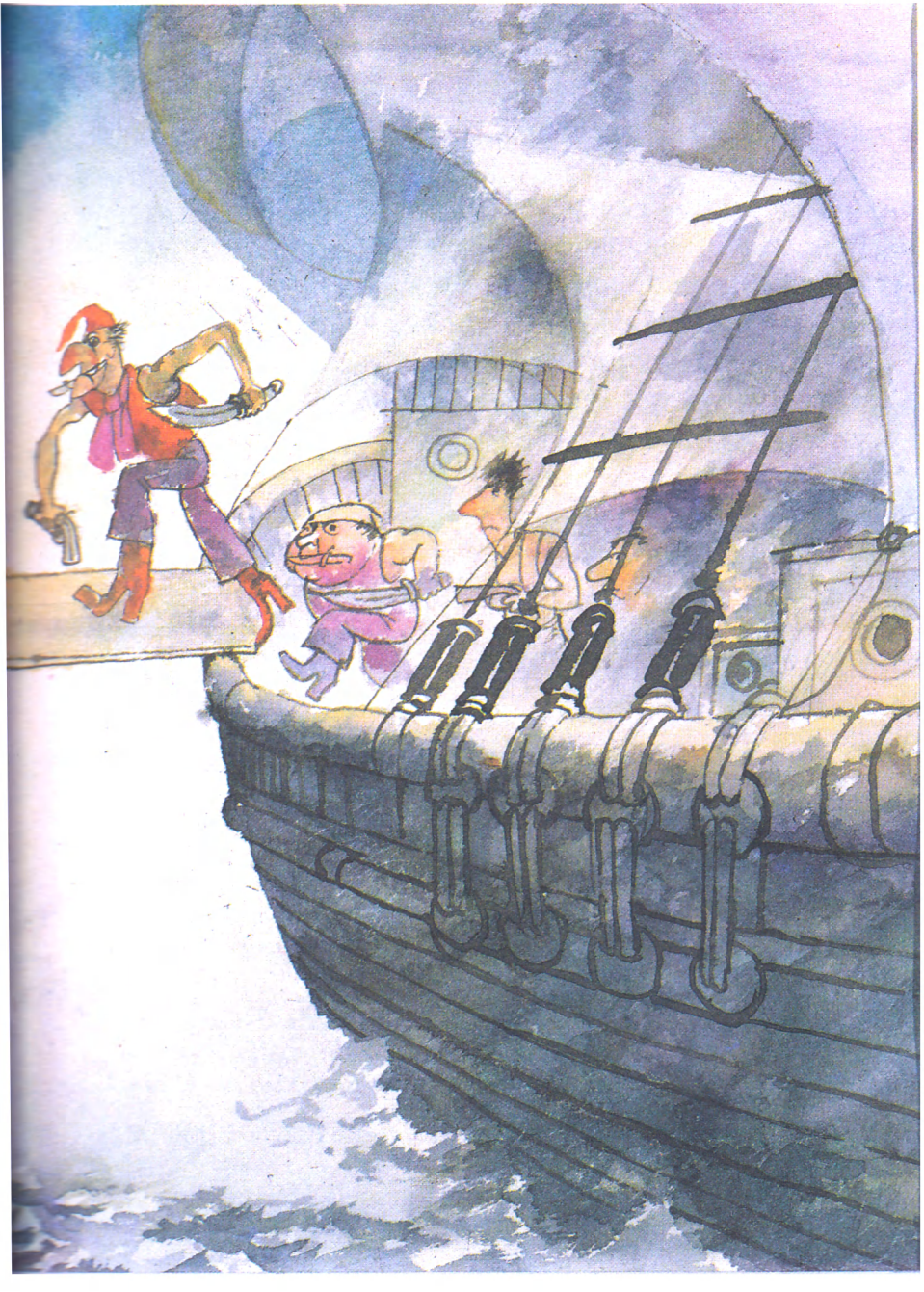
'The world's full of scoundrels,' he would say with conviction. 'We are the cream of society and yet... Shoot at anyone, and you're bound to hit a scoundrel!'

Yes, indeed, prisoners could expect no mercy from him.

After him on deck sprang the inseparable twins Jack and John. They were always together. If you saw one you knew the other was around.

Jack was long and as thin as a rake. His big doleful nose like a raven's beak stuck out in a sharp triangle. His tangled mat of black hair reminded one of a bird's nest that a bird had made in a chimney full of soot.





His brother John was just the opposite: a wee podgy fellow, round and pink, with hair like melting butter. The nose on his face was hardly visible; perhaps it had melted too.

In short, it would be hard to find two people so unlike one another. Nevertheless, both Jack and John would claim they were like two peas in a pod and no one could tell them apart. Pity the man who begged to differ.

So the pirates, just in case, called Jack John, and John Jack, making out they were always mixing them up.

'I like victory because it's noble!' lanky Jack would frequently say. 'Me and my brother John always attack a person together. It's safer that way and victory is assured.'

'Victory! It's lofty and grand,' fat John would say. 'Me and my brother Jack are standing while the foe bites the dust. He lies there while me and my brother Jack are standing. That's what's truly grand and gladdens the eye.'

The last to clamber on board *Dream* was a youngish red squirrel, you could say he was still a baby squirrel. He had a confused and unhappy look about him.

You know what a squirrel's main attraction is: a red bushy tail. Yet this one had all the fur on his tail shorn off. His miserable emaciated tail trailed dejectedly over the planks of the deck. You could see the Squirrel was a novice at the pirate business: he even held the pistol awkwardly, with the barrel facing himself.

Black Pussy, seeing the Squirrel's tail, could not hold herself in check and began to smack her lips with relish.

'Don't you smack your lips at him!' yelled chieftain Gina severely. 'He's a pirate. Taken the pirate's oath. Clear? We've taken him on as the Ship's Rat.'

'Rat! How that word excites me. Meao!' thought Black Pussy, narrowing her eyes dreamily.

The Squirrel shyly moved aside, and Black Pussy, captivated, had trouble averting her gaze from his tail.

'Perhaps I can smack my lips at that Swallow then?' purred Pussy

pleadingly. 'Or at least at that little fish in the barrel. The one that's trained, eh?!'

'Whatever next!' shouted chieftain Gina, silencing her firmly. 'We're going to keep them as hostages. That's the handiest thing about the pirate trade.'

'Never mind, the time'll come when I can smack my lips at them,' Black Pussy comforted herself. Neither the trained, nor the painted one will escape me. The main thing's that I was not mistaken. I made a wise choice. There they are, worthiness and justice, standing tied to the mast. Guile and cunning rule the world!'

In the meantime, lanky Jack had leapt over to the bound Captain Valentine and stuck a knife to his chest.

'Just see how much alike we are, me and my brother, just see,' he began to whine. 'Go on, take a look.'

'Alike as two peas in a pod,' said podgy John, taking it up. 'You wouldn't tell us apart.'

'Not a bit alike,' replied Captain Valentine, looking them square in the face.

Jack and John simply froze in their tracks at that unprecedented insult.

'Chief, did you hear?' they roared. 'Permit us to celebrate our victory. It will be a real pleasure to cut him up.'

It took chieftain Gina some time to calm down the maddened twins.

'He's just pretending to be decent,' hissed Shorty through his teeth sullenly.

On his bandy legs he swaggered over to Captain Valentine, his square head thrown back, and stared at him with fury and hatred. 'He's really just as much a scoundrel as the others. Shoot the devil and have done with it.'

'What's the rush, my hearty?' said chieftain Gina, thrusting him out of the way. 'I swear to you you've grown a bit during today's battle. You certainly have, strike me down and hope to die!'

The Squirrel did not know what to do with himself, how to behave; he looked at them all with his mild eyes guiltily and absently.

When one of the pirates stepped on his tail, he hurriedly apologised.

Something was oppressing and disturbing him. A pirate's life was quite different in practice to what he had imagined. To tell the truth, he had stumbled upon the pirate's ship quite accidentally.

The sea had beckoned him from early childhood. As quite a callow little squirrel he would pull the blanket over his head so that his mother would not see him reading exciting stories of sea adventures, battles and wonderful faraway countries by the light of a torch.

'Are nuts the only thing in life?' he would think to himself gloomily and despairingly. 'Just nuts and nothing else?'

But ships would sail round their flat, unremarkable Nut Island. The Squirrel would follow the white finely-made sails with his gaze and think that all the joy in life sailed away with them.

Red bushy tails scurried busily around him. Everyone would be drying mushrooms for winter and gathering cones and nuts. The Squirrel did what he could to get busy and forget everything. He would work so hard in the day sometimes that his back and paws would be aching, yet at night, no sooner would he shut his eyes than white, wind-filled sails would again billow out before him shimmering in the mist.

The Squirrel felt so terribly lonely. No one understood him. Other squirrels would give him a wary look, keeping clear of him.

And then one evening about dusk, pirates landed on the island. They lit a bonfire, began to sing pirate songs and dance. For the first time in his life the Squirrel tasted strong Jamaica rum. The pirates all hugged him, praised his sharp teeth, told him of the sheer danger and adventure of a free pirate's life.

The Squirrel climbed into a strong, pitch-smelling lifeboat whose keel was stuck firmly in the sand, and he patted the oars with his paws. The pirate ship made of golden palm wood lay at anchor half a mile off shore.

'Take me with you,' the Squirrel begged them fervently.

He grabbed the pirates either by the sleeve or by the hem of their oilskins.

'What can you do?' giggled the one-eyed pirate with a round earring in his ear. 'Can you fire a gun?'

'No,' confessed the Squirrel, his head hanging morosely.

'Maybe we could take him on board as a rat?' suggested a pirate. 'What sort of ship is it without a ship's rat? Really! He'll live in the hold. And if we spring a leak, he can sound the alarm at once and leave the sinking ship. And we'll know what's what.'

'Oh no,' gloomily snorted another pirate, the one who was no taller than a five-year-old, with a square head and shoulders. 'What about the tail? The tail won't do. Rats have quite different tails.'

'Well, we can shear off the fur and give him the right tail,' guffawed the pirates.

The pirates all set on Squirrel together. Before he could say Jack Robinson, sharp knives had cut off all the red bushy fur on his tail. Farewell, Squirrel's pride and joy!

Then the Squirrel took the pirate's oath. In his excitement he gave little thought to what he was saying. Everyone congratulated him, drank to his good health, solemnly rechristened him — Pirate Rat. And the Squirrel set off with the pirates for their ship.

How badly he wanted to show off his smartness and daring. Oh, if only he could leap just once from the foremast to the mainmast.

No, it was not to be: the pirates ordered him down to the hold straightaway.

Of course, it was dark and boring in the hold. The Squirrel, though, made it so spick and span down there — it was a sight for sore eyes. Every day he conscientiously inspected and tapped on the ship's bottom — to see if there was any leak. Heart in mouth he listened as the bisected waves rushed in watery babble from prow to stern.

'There'll be more storms and dangers, there's bound to be,' the Squirrel would think to himself hopefully. 'There'll be opportunities for them to see the stuff I'm made of. The main thing — I'm at sea. I'm sailing.'

And only when the pirates had seized *Dream* did any doubt begin to creep into the Squirrel's mind. He was not that keen on the way the twins and Shorty poked fun of the bound captain.

No, that was not at all like what the pirates had told him about their free and merry life. According to their stories you would have thought no one bolder or nobler could be found the world over, but the truth of the matter was...

What was he to do now? He had, after all, taken the pirate's oath. So now, no matter which way he twisted and turned, there was no going back.

In the ship's quarters, where the Squirrel had followed the pirates, Black Pussy had deliberately dropped the stool right on his tail. On purpose, of course it was on purpose! The Squirrel realised that very well.

'Pardon me, you dropped the tail on my stool,' the Squirrel told her politely, mixing up his words in his deep and hurt heartfelt confusion.

But Black Pussy just sat there in silence, quizzically gazing at him through icy eyes. Then she licked her lips in the same silence. And that, if you ask me, was exceedingly rude and tactless.

The Squirrel lost heart completely. Then a new job was given him. Chieftain Gina ordered him to find the ship's logbook and tear it to pieces. He had never had to carry out such instructions before. The Squirrel slid through the door of the captain's cabin. It was dark, empty and rather chilly. There was still a whiff of tobacco smoke in the air; evidently, the captain enjoyed smoking a pipe. The Squirrel became sad for some reason. The quivering, sparse light of the candle illuminated the cabin, and cast light on an old, worldly-wise yellowing map.

The Squirrel found the ship's log in the captain's desk. On the cover in large letters was the inscription: 'Ship's Log of the Brig *Dream*.' He was about to sink his teeth into it when curiosity got the better of him and he opened the log, deciding to read a few pages and see what it was about.

He started to read just out of curiosity, but it was not long before he became fascinated and forgot about everything, even about the sooty candle stump smouldering in front of him on the desk.

'Twelfth of May. Course north-north-east. Sixteen degrees, northern fairy-tale latitude, thirty-three degrees, eastern fairy-tale longitude.

'Scarcely had ten bells sounded than we heard a despairing screech at sea. Watch reported: bird's nest to starboard.

'A young bluefinch was circling the nest and crying. The nest held four baby birds: tiny, with yellow beaks, still unable to fly. With some difficulty we managed to coax the bluefinch down to the deck to tell us what had happened.

'It turned out that she had not listened to the older, experienced birds, and had built a nest on Hide-and-Seek Island. At first all had gone well. She hatched four fledgelings. But then the day previously a ship had appeared at dawn. Hide-and-Seek Island had given a soft laugh, bobbed up and down and then dived beneath the water. It was a good thing that the light nest had floated on the water like a round boat.

'Sailors wound steel hawsers round the nest. *Dream* set course for Slow Learners Island. It is a depressing island where yellow leaves fall from trees the whole year round. But you can still raise your family there.'

The Squirrel turned a few more pages.

'Fifteenth of May. The sky all round is covered in storm-clouds. Watch reported: one storm-cloud flying straight for us. A strange cloud: dark red colour, loudly buzzing. It was ladybirds. Tired out, exhausted, unable to battle with the oncoming wind.

'We invited the ladybirds to come down onto the deck, and they took up the whole deck, wrapped themselves round the masts and stays. The weighed-down ship almost capsized. We fed them on all our supplies of sugar.

'By morning the wind had switched round. And the ladybirds were able to continue their flight. Only one problem: politeness. All seven

hundred and eighty ladybirds said: "Thank You Very Much." We had to reply seven hundred and eighty times: "You're Very Welcome."

'Twentieth of May. Course north-east. Force nine storm. Rudder broken. Jib snapped off.

'Twenty-first of May. Storm continues unabated. Sailors display great bravery. Seaman Sou'wester rescued Bony the cabin-boy who was almost swept overboard by a wave.'

The Squirrel turned one more page, but at that moment his shoulder was touched by a soft velvety paw. Out of the warm velvet emerged very sharp claws. Coarse whiskers touched his cheek as if their ends had been filed down to a fine point.

You can guess who it was: the Pirate Cat.

'And what do you think you're playing at, Ship's Rat?' hissed Black Pussy. 'What did the chief tell you to do?'

'Gnaw,' mumbled the Squirrel in a weak voice.

'And what are you doing?'

'Gnaw up all this bravery?' said the Squirrel, looking up at Black Pussy in despair. 'I cannot... You read it for yourself.'

Black Pussy became even more enraged.

She had never got past her first year at school and had packed it in altogether, so she had never learned to read.

'Fancy yourself, do you, just because you can read?' she muttered in a rage, but right away changed her tactics and became slyer, more catlike. She now spoke in syrupy tones, with a grimace, 'Now how could you, dear Rat? I mean, you did take the pirate oath.'

'I did,' nodded the Squirrel dejectedly.

'Well I never! What a dear little creature you are, all nice and plump,' Black Pussy lisped. 'And what whiter than white teeth you have. Do you brush them every day? You must really try hard for your mates and pals.'

That decided the Squirrel. How long he had dreamed of friendship. He shut his eyes and despairingly sank his teeth into the hard leather binding.

Chapter 13

The Pirates Celebrate Victory and More: the Ship's Ghost, or the Enchanted Chicken

Once she was certain Squirrel had finally set to work, Black Pussy muttered,

'Clever lad, that's the way, carry on...'

And she slipped from the captain's cabin.

From the upper deck came the hoarse voices of the pirates. They were rolling a wine barrel across the deck. The pirates were preparing to celebrate victory.

Pussy hurriedly made for the crew's quarters. What a hullaballo was going on there. The pirates had uncorked bottles and were dragging out all the eatables they could get their hands on.

The trained Sardine in her barrel was keeping quieter than a mouse, afraid even to flick her tail.

'Oh, fish-hostage! Fish-hostage!' thought Black Pussy. 'She's likely to be tastier than any other fish on earth.'

And covering her mouth with her paw she smacked her lips surreptitiously.

'Never mind, I'll get my claws into you, my trained Sardine.'

In the meanwhile, left alone in the captain's cabin, the Squirrel was really down in the dumps. Folding his thin arms on the ship's log, and letting his head rest upon them, he fell deep in thought.

'What am I going to do? I don't want to live in a tree trunk. Yet I cannot be a pirate. So there we are: neither rat nor squirrel, neither pirate nor an honest sailor... Oh dear, to heck with everything.'

The Squirrel carefully concealed the ship's log upon a shelf, piling books on top of it. As far as he could gather, the pirates were not that fond of reading and were hardly likely to go rummaging about in books.

He found an old atlas, tore it into pieces and scattered the scraps all over the cabin. Then he made his way dejectedly to the crew's quarters. It was stuffy, warm and noisy. The pirates were already sitting round the table.

Chieftain Gina brought in a dish of roast chicken and put it in the centre of the table.

The Squirrel gingerly squatted on the very edge of a stool.

'I don't trust that Rat, Chief,' Black Pussy was whispering to her mistress. 'Too clever by half. He hasn't a pirate's spirit, no, no pirate's spirit.'

The Squirrel would have liked very much to sit with the others round the table, he was only just feeling the tip of his tail growing warm.

'Pirate Ship's Rat,' said chieftain Gina severely. 'Quick march to the crow's nest. Keep eyes peeled. If anything happens, report immediately.'

The Squirrel gave an inaudible sigh. He was not at all happy, not the slightest, about abandoning the warm cabin and going out into the cold night, into the gloom, on to the deck wet from the night damp, where the captain and his assistant were standing silently, tied to the mast. They were not complaining, not groaning, not asking for mercy. And at the stern, motionless like a graven image, was the dark figure of the handsome, sharp-winged bird.

'I so wanted to join in the feast with my friends,' muttered the Squirrel miserably.

'We'll leave you your pirate's portion, don't worry,' said chieftain Gina magnanimously.

The Squirrel obediently trudged out of the cabin.

Black Pussy, her green eyes gleaming, made a move towards the roast chicken.

'I've not had roast chicken for ages,' she purred.

'Give me a drumstick,' roared Shorty. 'And who's to say I'm not tall enough for that.'

'No, give us the drumsticks,' wailed Jack. 'Me and my brother. See here. These drumsticks are twins as well. The spitting image of each other, exactly like me and my brother John.'

'You can make do with the wings,' snorted Shorty threateningly.

'Are you trying to say you know which of us is Jack and which John?' said Jack with a suspicious scowl.

Both twins were on their feet now.

'Easy, pirates, take it easy,' said chieftain Gina, cool and collected. 'Everyone'll get an equal portion. But let's discuss our plans first.'

The Squirrel timidly peered into the cabin.

'Chief, pardon me, there's a ship to starboard,' he reported quietly.

'Curses!' hissed chieftain Gina. 'Douse the lights.'

With two fingers she snuffed out the candle's burning wick, as though she was choking the flame.

The cabin was plunged in darkness. Only Pussy's eyes emitted two straight green rays.

'Turn off your eyes,' Gina yelled at her. 'Everyone on deck. And not a peep out of any of you... Hey, twins, keep an eye on the prisoners.'

The pirates climbed the gangway on tiptoe.

Brother Jack put his hand over the mouth of Captain Valentine, while brother John did the same with First Mate Senya. Shorty, standing on tiptoe, put a knife to the smooth neck of Swallow Two Spots.

'I'm right beside you, just in case, my treasure, my painted friend,' came the hardly audible murmur of Black Pussy, pressing her warm soft haunches into the Swallow.

The caravel *Santa Maria* passed by them in the pitch darkness. Admiral Christopher Columbus himself was standing on the high raised prow embellished by a gilt, wood-carved mermaid; he was stooping, leaning all his weight on the hilt of his ancient sword. Candles glinted in the cabins, the taut ropes twanged, the sails rustled.

'All clear,' breathed chieftain Gina, as she watched the ship, the lights and the voices melting away into the gloom.

Meanwhile, the trained Sardine who had remained alone in the crew's quarters, was not wasting time.

'I'll have a look-see,' she decided. 'I cannot hear anything in the barrel. Just a "boo-boo-boo", and "boo-boo-boo". I've got to uncover their plans.'

The daring Sardine slipped out of the barrel, somehow managed to scramble on to a stool, from there to the table, all the while keeping an eye on the door. With great difficulty she seized the roast chicken in her slippery fins, dropped it into the water barrel, and then lay on the dish in its place. Trying not to breathe and flip her tail, she lay motionless stretched out on the plate.

The pirates piled back into the cabin with stamping and laughter, knocking against one another in the dark.

'We led the old buffer a merry dance!'

'You won't find us, Admiral, in a thousand years!'

'You're not discovering America now, you know!'

'By Jiminy, mateys, the night's darn cold!'

'Isn't it time to try the roast chicken?' sang out Black Pussy sweetly.

Chieftain Gina lit three candles in the enormous candleholder. The candles gave a crackle and flicked out tall tongues of flame.

Taking a knife in one hand and a fork in the other, chieftain Gina leaned towards the dish in the centre of the table... And suddenly she froze, her eyebrows shooting up in amazement.

'What's this?' she exclaimed sharply.

'Fish,' said One-Eye innocently.

'I can see it's fish myself,' she snarled. 'I seem to recall roasting chicken.'

'I seem to recall you did too,' confirmed One-Eye.

'But this is fish. Fish!' yelled Gina almost in despair.

'Well, chief, that means you must have roasted fish,' said Shorty, shrugging his square shoulders.

Chieftain Gina extended a hand to her face; she had gone as white as a sheet.

'Well, perhaps I did,' she sighed, calming down somewhat. 'Evidently, in the heat of battle it quite slipped my mind what I had cooked: fish or chicken.'

'Never mind, in that case let's eat fish,' said Black Pussy, smacking her lips and swinging her tail under the table in pleasure. She thrust out her neck to sniff the fish and even wrinkled her nose.

'How fresh it smells!'

In an instant the pirates had snatched up their forks and extended them to the fish.

The trained Sardine on the plate gave a slight shudder. True, it was not at all noticeable. The candle flame flickered from the ship's rocking and, in any case, the fish's scales glimmered brightly.

'Those forks will now be piercing me,' thought the trained Sardine horror-struck. 'Of course, I would willingly sacrifice my life for the sake of my friend Sou'wester and for the sake of noble Captain Valentine. But to die from a pirate's fork, ugh!'

Shorty's fork was already touching her scales...

'Put down your forks!' thundered chieftain Gina. 'Let's discuss our plans first.'

The pirates grudgingly obeyed.

Chieftain Gina swept the pirates with a keen, steady glance.

'Listen to me, all of you, to me, Gina Just-Give-Us-A-Smile,' she said triumphantly. 'We've got to take Captains' Island. Pirates' Island — that's what the island will be called henceforth. Sail to us, little ships, sail to us in trust and innocence. In the deep gloom we'll be on

the lookout for you, plunder and send you to the bottom, one after the other. For a start we'll sink *Dream,* and the torch given by the man in the big city on a real river. I'll order the Ship's Rat to gnaw a hole in *Dream*'s bottom.'

'That's all very well, chief,' growled Black Pussy with a shiver. 'We don't need the torch, true enough. But I wouldn't say I fancy splashing about in the briny. Brrr.'

'We'll sink *Dream* and transfer to our pirate ship,' said chieftain Gina straightening up, her eyes flashing. 'Remember, pirates! Remember the golden rule of gentlemen of fortune: "If it's less for him, it's more for me, and no bother!" '

Cries of delight rang round the room. The pirates howled, squealed, guffawed and cocked their pistols.

'If it's less for him, it's more for me...' said Shorty, probably so that he did not forget it, as he gave the twins and One-Eye a dirty look from under his square brows.

'I don't trust that one, the so-called ... you know, the Rat,' said Pussy shaking her head. 'He hasn't got a pirate's spirit, no. Too clever by half, and all that.'

'We'll leave the "so-called" on board the sinking ship,' snarled chieftain Gina with a dismissive wave of her hand.

Black Pussy brightened up instantly.

'If that's the case, let's get stuck into this fish,' she yelled, unable to hold back any longer, licking her lips with her taut little pink tongue.

'Fish!' roared the pirates raising their forks.

The unfortunate Sardine shivered on the dish, trying with all her strength to disguise the shudder.

Just at that moment a wet, cold-benumbed Squirrel looked into the cabin. He was breathing on the tip of his tail, rubbing it with his paw.

'Chief, it's not my fault, but there's a ship to leeward,' he reported, sniffing.

'Fooo-oo!' the pirates all together blew on the candles. Then they quickly crowded up the gangway on the deck.

A brightly-lit ship was passing *Dream*. They could hear lively and rapid French coming from its deck. The strains of a guitar, a tune. It was Captain Jean's *Albatross*.

The ship passed on by, turning into an indistinct golden spot on the horizon. The spot finally faded away completely.

Meanwhile, the trained Sardine, left alone in the cabin, crawled from the dish, shaking from head to toe with fright. She knocked over a goblet of red wine in her hurry, and then a salt cellar. Somehow she managed to waddle to the edge of the table and dive into the water barrel. Almost out of breath she caught hold of the roast chicken in her trembling fins, let the water drip off of it, then wiped it with the edge of the table cloth and placed it on the dish. With her remaining strength, she sprinkled it with dried dill and garnished it with parsley.

No sooner had she finished that difficult task than she heard rough voices and the tramping of feet. The pirates were returning.

The trained Sardine only just managed to dive back into the barrel.

Noisily the pirates took their seats round the table.

'Fishy, fishy, fishy,' cried Shorty, blowing loudly on his frozen hands. 'I wouldn't say no to a nice piece of fish.'

'We've won, my pirates!' said chieftain Gina with a toss of her black curls dulled from the night dampness. 'Cast your worries away. Let's feast to our hearts' content.'

Chieftain Gina stretched her knife and fork towards the plate, and all of a sudden froze in her tracks, her hands motionless above the table. Her face had turned terribly pale.

'What's this!' she mumbled hardly audibly.

The fork made a feeble tinkle against the knife in her shaking hands.

'Chicken...' spluttered One-Eye, blinking his only eye in astonishment.

You cannot imagine the terror and panic that seized the pirates when they saw roast chicken on the dish instead of fish.

They rushed from the table, knocking over stools and chairs.

'Pirates, this chicken must be a ghost,' muttered Gina Just-Give-Us-A-Smile as she backed towards the door.

'I wouldn't eat a wing even for a purse full of gold,' gasped Black Pussy, all the fur on her back standing on end.

'This ship must have a ghost on board,' groaned lanky Jack, trying to hide behind John. 'It's changed the chicken into a fish.'

'And the fish into a chicken,' added fat John, trying to hide behind Jack.

'Clearly... It's had a hand in this!' wheezed Shorty and grew even smaller, as if the terror was oppressing him like an invisible weight.

The pirates all bunched in one corner.

'Ship's Rat, come here,' ordered chieftain Gina in a weak, halting voice.

'Squirrel! Rat!' yelled the pirates discordantly.

Little claws could be heard scraping along the gangway, and into the cabin ran the Squirrel.

'Here's your pirate's portion,' muttered chieftain Gina, pointing to the chicken from afar.

'Me? The whole chicken?' exclaimed the Squirrel, quite moved. From emotion tears started in his eyes.

'But first carry out my order,' said Gina, unable to take her eyes off the enchanted chicken. She thought it was about to change back into a fish at any moment. In her fright it even seemed to her that the chicken had scales and a pair of fins on its back.

'Pirate Rat! I order you immediately to gnaw a hole in the bottom of the ship. As big as possible.'

'For your mates and pals,' said Black Pussy, politely stepping over his tail. With shaking paw she patted the Squirrel on the back.

'Oh, very well,' said the Squirrel in an unhappy voice.

'A pirate should do anything for his friends,' said chieftain Gina, trying to appear calm. But, unable to control herself, she turned round, picking up the hem of her skirt, and took to her heels, rushing along the gangway.

Jostling one another, the pirates rushed after her.

With some surprise, the Squirrel followed them with his gaze. Then he settled down on a chair and put his chin in his paws.

The sea and sky glimmered through the round porthole. The sky was turning into an even, calm patch of blue. The sea had dark blue waves. It promised to be a clear, sunny day.

Squirrel recalled the bold captain, the sailors thrown into the hold, firmly bound by their hands and feet. And he grew more miserable than he had ever been in his life.

For more years than he could remember he had dreamed of sea voyages and of friends, and he had found them at last, yet now he could well lose all.

'To gnaw or not to gnaw?' he said with a heavy sigh.

'Don't gnaw,' came an anxious voice from out of nowhere.

The Squirrel gave a start, turned round and saw the head of the trained Sardine poking out of the barrel.

'Oh, it's you,' the Squirrel muttered indifferently. Then he suddenly jumped up and began to speak fervently, pressing his paws to his chest,

'Do please understand, fish head, how can I avoid doing it? If I don't, I'll remain alone, with no friends.'

'Oh you silly little thing,' said the Sardine sadly. 'The pirates are deceiving you. I heard them myself: they said the ship would go to the bottom, and you with it.'

'I don't believe you,' groaned the Squirrel. 'They're my friends.'

'Pirates aren't anyone's friends,' said the trained Sardine firmly.

In despair, the Squirrel wrung his thin paws.

'To gnaw or not to gnaw?' he repeated despairingly.

Chapter 14

The Pirates Abandon Dream *and More: the Squirrel Gains Real Friends*

The sun rose and golden waves cascaded from it to the very prow of the ship. Captain Valentine gazed thoughtfully at the sea.

'It's going to be a lovely day,' sighed First Mate Tops'l Senya.

'With such weather we'd have seen our native shores tomorrow, or at least the day after,' pondered Captain Valentine but he held his peace.

The pirates came tramping onto the deck, seeming to take delight in the light of day and sunshine. Chieftain Gina glanced back with undisguised terror at the steps leading down below, her shoulders shuddered as if from cold.

Then she went up to Captain Valentine and stopped before him.

'Say goodbye to your life, Captain,' she muttered grimly. 'Your time's up. Your lighthouse will be lighting up the sea bed for the fish!'

'Water's already pouring into the hold,' called One-Eye from amid the crowd of pirates.

'The Squirrel has gnawed a big hole in the keel,' added Black Pussy.

'Well, Captain, isn't it time to cast overboard all that honesty and justice nonsense? Who needs them now?'

Even though he had firmly made up his mind not to enter into any conversation with the pirates, Captain Valentine could not restrain himself.

'Do what you like with me,' he said, 'but down below in the hold are my sailors... Sleeping. There's Bony the cabin-boy...'

He tried to keep his cool, but it was not easy.

'Give them a chance to save themselves, to take to the boats. Don't you have a modicum of pity in you?'

'Pity?' spat out chieftain Gina, curling her lips contemptuously. 'Pity only degrades a pirate. I wouldn't hesitate to toss overboard anyone known to harbour such sour thoughts.'

'Blackguards!' said Captain Valentine in disgust. 'What is honour and decency to you, you low scoundrels.'

'You'll go to the bottom along with your honour and ghosts,' snorted One-Eye nastily.

'Oh, don't remind me,' wailed Black Pussy with a wave of her paws.

The pirates threw over the gangplank between *Dream* and Tommy's ship. And a melee began: each wanted to leave the bewitched ship as soon as possible.

But chieftain Gina quickly sorted them out. She whipped out her pistols from the pockets of her snow-white apron and fired them into the air. Then she ran across the gangplank, lightly tapping in her high heels. The other pirates followed in her wake.

No sooner had the last pirate abandoned *Dream* than the Squirrel burst on to deck like a bullet, holding up his tail to prevent it getting in his way.

'Wait, hold on,' he cried despairingly. 'What about me? You've forgotten me.'

'Pull up the gangplank,' yelled chieftain Gina ignoring him utterly.

'But we're friends, aren't we... I took the pirate's oath.'

The Squirrel held out his thin paws in supplication.

'Too clever by half,' laughed Black Pussy spitefully. 'What a pity I wasn't able to get a proper taste of you!'

The Squirrel stood there, head bent, watching the sails billow out and the palm-wood ship disappear from view. Captain Valentine also followed Tommy's ship, watching the skull and crossbones flutter on the mast in the bright glow of early morning rays.

'Well, let's face our fate with dignity,' he said calmly.

'That goes without saying, naturally,' sighed First Mate Tops'l Senya. 'But when you think of the water coming up to your knees, then higher, higher, higher... The main thing is I won't see Captains' Island any more, had no time to say farewell to the lads... And all because of those wretched pirates.'

Captain Valentine gave a sharp tug, but the tight ropes only cut more deeply into his tortured body.

'No, the pirates won't roam Fairy Tale Ocean for long,' he exclaimed heatedly. 'Admiral Columbus and Captain Jean have already put to sea. All the captains will unfurl their sails and avenge us.'

The Squirrel wearily approached Captain Valentine slowly dragging his legs as if each one was tied to a weight. He gnawed through the ropes tying his hands and feet.

'You are free, Captain,' he sighed haplessly.

'Quick,' shouted Captain Valentine, rushing towards the gangway, despite his terrible weakness. His numb feet were loath to obey him. 'Save the sailors. Help them take to the boats.'

First Mate Senya rushed after him. Yet hardly had they taken more than a couple of steps when they heard wet, slurping noises. The trained Sardine came waddling awkwardly along the gangway.

'It's as dry as a bone in the hold, just like the bottom of an empty barrel,' she muttered with difficulty before falling silent in her impotence.

Captain Valentine and First Mate Tops'l Senya turned to the Squirrel in astonishment.

'My teeth did not touch the ship's bottom,' said the Squirrel with a faraway look in his eyes. 'But I'm as lonely as an empty nut.'

Captain Valentine was rubbing his numb, swollen wrists.

'Are we really free? Is *Dream* really saved?'

'Don't be sad, Squirrel,' he said kindly. And he hugged his narrow red shoulders. 'You've now found real friends.'

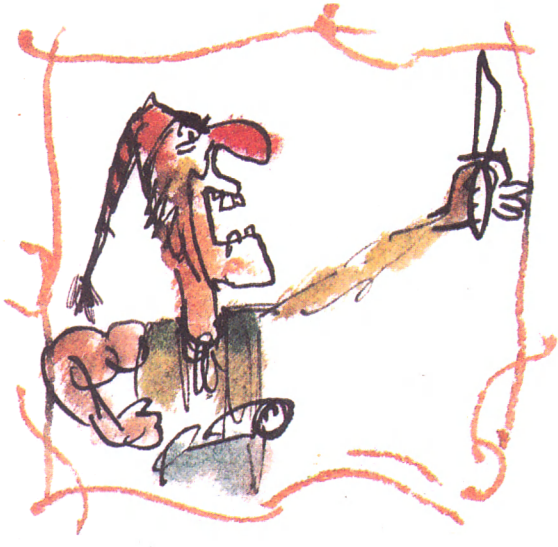
'That's us,' echoed blue-eyed Sou'wester coming up the gangway. He gave a wide yawn and a stretch. 'Captain, he freed all the sailors, biting through their ropes. Never mind about your tail. Give it a month and it'll be nice and bushy again.'

'Oh, you cannot call that work, biting through ropes,' objected the Squirrel hotly. 'I can do much better than that. Especially for my friends.'

One by one the sailors came tottering up on deck, rubbing their eyes with their fists, yawning sweetly, unable to comprehend why such a strong sleep had suddenly overtaken them all.

And then with a flap and rustle *Dream*'s mainsail billowed out as the wind filled it.

'Set course for Captains' Island,' commanded Captain Valentine.



Chapter 15

Young Captain Tommy and More: the Pirates on Captains' Island

By nightfall the capricious Fairy Tale Ocean had blown up a storm.

Low, shaggy storm-clouds covered the moon. Now and then it succeeded in poking a tiny corner from behind a cloud, so that its timid light momentarily illumined the huge, almost transparent greenish waves.

Then once again everything would be plunged into pitch darkness. With a crash the waves would come tumbling down on the cliffs, fall back in the gloom and glimmer with a silver lacey foam.

That evening the Goldfish Tavern was virtually empty. Despite the inclement weather all the captains had put to sea in the hope of coming upon the good ship *Dream*.

Only young Captain Tommy and Captain Nils were sitting dejected at a little table in the tavern, whiling away the long evening together.

'Now, why Oh why, did my little Nils make the *Merry Troll* with paper sails?' over and over thought Captain Nils in futile despair, clenching his strong hands until his knuckles blanched. 'Even Admiral Columbus has put to sea. His sailors carried him on board in their arms. Even he, yet here am I...'

His elbows leaning on the table, Captain Tommy was gazing at the

black window, seeing nothing beyond, listening to the crashing sounds of the sea. All of a sudden, the Uninvited Guest bat came flying in through the window. Its webbed wings each like half a black umbrella, it circled creaking, above Tommy's head. It squeaked something indistinct like 'Pie... la Pie... la...' before flying off into the night.

If in his spare time Tommy had learned a word or two of bat language he would certainly have understood what the Uninvited Guest was trying to say. Like all bats it only pronounced the first syllable of each word. And its message for Tommy was a vital one:

'Pirates landed! Pirates landed!'

But Tommy had not the faintest idea what the bat was saying, so he just sat there, gloomily gazing at the rumpled, winestained table cloth and propping up his cheeks with his fists.

Neither he nor Captain Nils noticed the blindingly green eyes of Black Pussy flash outside the window. They flared up and died down.

With greedy hatred the Cat watched the Uninvited Guest fly out of sight.

For your information, mateys, the most cherished dream of every cat is to catch a bat. No ordinary mouse, you see, but a flying mouse — that is, a bat. There's a story among cats that if one of them catches and eats a bat, it will become a Flying Cat. All cats know that. And if a cat stretches out its forelegs, and draws its claws in and out in his sleep, it means that it is dreaming of catching a bat.

So now Black Pussy was peering through the tavern window.

'Chief, there's only the paper captain and the lad,' she whispered.

Chieftain Gina thought for a moment, then beckoned the pirates to her.

'Right, we'll now use No. 1 cunning,' she explained in a whisper. 'I'll divert their attention while you run in and act.'

Young Tommy turned sharply at the long drawn-out creaking of the door hinges. Seeing the tavern hostess and Black Pussy in the doorway, he leapt up from his seat.

'And where's Captain Valentine? Is he with you? Where is he?' shouted Tommy anxiously.

The tavern hostess tottered forward, took a few uncertain steps as if at the end of her tether. Captain Nils jumped up to hold her up.

'Oh dear,' she groaned. 'Don't ask me any questions. I know nothing. All I remember are storms, waves... We were swept overboard by a huge wave... About the size of a ten-storey house.'

'With lift and television set,' added Black Pussy in a fading voice, remembering the stories that the trained Sardine had told about the big real city.

Both captains did not notice the pirates noiselessly, on tiptoe, coming through the tavern door. All of a sudden, the pirates threw themselves at the dumbfounded captains with bloodcurdling yells.

Shorty jumped on Tommy's back and clung fast to him, with both arms round his neck. Together with One-Eye the two of them swiftly tied him up.

It was not so easy to deal with Captain Nils, even though the pirates stuck to him on all sides like bees round a honey pot.

'Right, you blighters!' hissed Captain Nils with difficulty.

He summoned up all his strength and the twins Jack and John flew in different directions, knocking over chairs and the light straw stools.

Goodness knows how it would all have ended had not Shorty slyly tripped him up. Captain Nils went crashing to the floor, with the pirates on top of him, binding him with ropes.

'Scoundrels!' wheezed Captain Nils. 'Fancy tripping a captain up! Shame on you.'

'Tripping up is our fighting method!' shouted Black Pussy.

The pirates stuffed napkins into the captains' mouths, dragged them into the larder, flung them onto the floor and locked the door.

'That's that,' said chieftain Gina, coolly thrusting the pistols into the pockets of her apron. 'Captains' Island is no more. The Island is ours.'

Yet even now she was not smiling.

The pirates began shooting into the air in their delight. Sharp wooden splinters flew from the ceiling, making the cups and saucers jangle.

Chapter 16

The Phantom Ship and More: How This Amazing Story Ends

What a merry bustling now began. Fire crackled on the hearth. The twins, long Jack and fat John, started to sing.

Black Pussy sniffed all the corners, chairs, door and even the wooden leg of the old servant. Home at long last! No, no matter what you say, the ocean is no place for a cat. Cats should be sitting by a blazing fireplace, on their favourite stool, in warmth and comfort.

'I am Pussy Pirate, Pussy the Conqueror,' she was thinking to herself contentedly. 'Nobody in the whole wide world can beat me. Meouw!'

Black Pussy got so carried away she lapped up a whole saucerful of Jamaica rum, and then half a saucerful on top of that.

She turned her head to admire the reflections of the fire's flames in her smooth black fur.

'I seem to have two tails today,' thought the drunken Cat. 'As a matter of fact, I think it is just as well. One tail may be given to the mistress on her birthday or exchanged for something very valuable. Or I might keep both of them. The only question is: do two tails

suit me? There's the rub. A pity there's no mirror around. Maybe I'll have a peek into the window glass and make up my mind.'

Black Pussy hopped up to the windowsill and suddenly froze, pressing her nose to the glass.

'Chief, there's a ship at the pier,' she meowed hoarsely.

Chieftain Gina scowled in vexation. What a nuisance the pirate's life was sometimes! Not a moment's peace. Just one thing after another...

'We'll just have to think up another piece of cunning,' she snorted crossly. 'It's probably *Santa Maria* with that old cabbage-patch scarecrow Columbus or Frenchman Jean's *Albatross.*'

'Chief, it's *Dream,*' screamed Black Pussy, interrupting her and flying down swiftly from the windowsill. Fear had sobered her up in a trice.

'The phantom ship,' babbled One-Eye, his teeth chattering.

'Cunning is powerless against phantoms,' muttered chieftain Gina in a defeated voice, all a-quiver.

The pirates rushed to the windows.

Some shadows were flitting along the narrow lane towards the tavern. The moon peeped out from the middle of a huge dark cloud as if poking out of some deep pocket. It suddenly lit up the figures coming along the lane: they were now quite distinct. In front resolutely walked Captain Valentine, followed by the tall Sou'wester carrying the trained Sardine in his arms.

In the moonlight their faces seemed ghostly pale and the trained Sardine's scales gleamed a greenish silver. Bringing up the rear was the Squirrel, his bare tail wriggling between the cobblestones and seeming to be endless.

In terror the pirates rushed about the tavern. The twins Jack and John crawled beneath the same table and were now shoving each other with elbows and knees out of the hiding place.

'The Captain's ghost!' groaned chieftain Gina in horror, staring wildly round for a hiding place.

'Sou'wester's ghost!' screamed One-Eye, falling to his knees.

'The Fish ghost!' squealed the Cat.

Let us note in fairness that on this occasion she was not wondering what was tastier: an ordinary live fish or a fish ghost...

The door burst open.

'Surrender, you villains!' roared Captain Valentine.

The pirates crowded into one shivering heap, that looked like some quivering pirate jelly. Out of the pile poked the jerking legs of Shorty and the twitching hind legs and tail of Black Pussy.

'Throw down your arms,' ordered Captain Valentine.

Curved knives and pistols showered upon the floor.

'We're giving them up, dear ghosts. Only please don't touch us with your cold fingers!' whimpered One-Eye.

The Cat was about to whip out her pistol from her belt to toss it into the common pile when suddenly her nose twitched, she sniffed the air suspiciously and yelled.

'The Captain smells of captain. The fish smells of fish.'

'Ghosts don't smell. We all know that,' chieftain Gina caught up, coming to her senses in a flash. 'Seize your weapons, pirates. Out with the light.'

All together the pirates blew on the candles. The tavern was plunged into pitch darkness. A terrible hullabaloo and scuffle ensued. It was impossible to make out who was on your side and who against you.

'Jack, brother, where are you?'

'I'm here, over here, brother John.'

Captain Valentine threw himself at the voices of the twins, but his hands only caught something slippery and cold. Instead of the pirates he had run into Sou'wester holding his trained Sardine.

'Pussy, Black Pussy, where are you?' yelled chieftain Gina her voice breaking. 'Where are you, for heavens' sake?'

Not a sound. Black Pussy made no reply. Yet it seemed chieftain Gina herself could see in the dark no worse than a cat.

'Follow me, pirates,' she whispered in the hubbub. 'I'll get you out.'

In the dark Shorty bumped into her and grabbed hold of her skirt;

hanging on to him were the twins, then came One-Eye and the rest of the pirates. In a chain they began to wind their way unnoticed between the overturned chairs and stools towards the exit.

Captain Valentine well knew that if the pirates managed to slip out of the tavern under cover of darkness, make the harbour and seize one of the ships, things would start all over again.

As it happened, just at that moment, as if to spite them, the moon once again hid behind a thick, shaggy black cloud, so that no one could make out at all where the door, window or wall were.

The door creaked secretively on its hinges. It was clear what was happening: while the sailors were poking around in all the corners like blind kittens, the pirates had fumbled for the door and... That's it. Gone! You can now seek a needle in a haystack, as they say, or, rather, a ship amid the sea.

And just at that moment, when it seemed all was lost and everything had gone for a Burton, a blazing spotlight made a direct hit on the wide open door of the tavern picking the band of pirates out of the darkness.

The wide spotlight barred their way like a wall. The pirates froze in their tracks, unable to take one step towards that implacable light. Letting out groans and curses and shielding their eyes with their hands, the pirates all edged backwards.

'Pirates. All is not yet lost. Follow me, through the window!' yelled chieftain Gina, collecting her thoughts first and rushing towards the window. She nimbly cocked one leg over the windowsill.

However, the blinding, seemingly white-hot spotlight at once shifted so that it was trained right on the window. The pirates fell back again.

Taking advantage of their panic, the *Dream* sailors disarmed them at once.

First Mate Tops'l Senya saw to the candles and the tavern was lit up brightly. The pirates crowded into the far corner, frightened and panic-stricken, but at the same time full of helpless rage and hatred. And right in the centre of the tavern, between the pirates and the *Dream* crew sat Black Pussy turning her head swiftly one way and

then the other, staring first at chieftain Gina, then at Captain Valentine. It's no secret, mateys, what she was thinking at that moment.

'Curses! I've come a cropper, that's for sure. I underestimated all that decency and bravery. I was wrong. I thought that cunning and guile were stronger than anything on earth, but in reality...'

'They deceived me! Pulled the wool over my eyes!' whined Black Pussy despairingly. She rushed to Captain Valentine, and purring ingratiatingly, began to rub herself against his legs.

'I knew nothing. I'm just a tiny, silly little thing. I didn't mean to, I blundered...'

'Traitor!' exclaimed the trained Sardine contemptuously and Sou'wester gently patted her scales to calm her down.

Just at that moment dull thuds were heard from the lumber room. The door shook, flew off its hinges and crashed down with a bang. And into the room tumbled Tommy and Captain Nils in a pile of dust. Pieces of rope still hung from them.

Unarmed yet full of determination and daring, they were ready to join battle with the pirates, but suddenly they came face to face with Captain Valentine and the whole *Dream* crew. Utterly taken aback, they stopped dead in their tracks.

'It's me, mateys,' simply said Captain Valentine. 'Tommy, your ship is at the pier. All you have to do is take down the pirate flag from the mast.'

Thereupon Tommy behaved like no stalwart captain is supposed to. With a yell of delight he threw his arms round Captain Valentine's neck. Then he did a somersault, a salto-mortale that any circus acrobat would have been proud of. And then he threw his arms around Captain Valentine's neck once more.

'I wonder who on earth lit the lighthouse in the nick of time?' asked Captain Valentine.

And only then did everyone see the Good Companion standing in the tavern doorway, and alongside him was the Squirrel, looking at the door in embarrassment. And just below the ceiling, with folded wings and hanging head down, was the silent Bat.

'It was him who had the bright idea, dear good old Squirrel,' said the Good Companion. 'He's so clever and agile. He and I together fetched the torch up the Lonely Cliff. We had a good hand from the Uninvited Guest too. Of course, we've only fixed the torch on any-old-how for the moment. Just propped it up with stones.'

'Good lad, seaman Squirrel,' said Captain Valentine. At the praise the Squirrel's face was simply wreathed in smiles.

'I swear to my Granddad you did everything right,' cried Captain Doitright in delight as he came rushing into the tavern.

In his joy he hugged Captain Valentine and young Tommy as well as Captain Nils in his mighty embrace.

In came Captain Jean, supporting the elbow of old Admiral Columbus, quite worn out by all the fuss. All the same, the old Admiral had held up well in the circumstances. Taking a step away from Captain Jean, he leaned upon his sword and hobbled over to a chair by himself; then he simply collapsed into it with all his bones creaking.

'Now that the island has a lighthouse no one will need me,' said the Good Companion sadly. 'Now nobody, even if they wanted to give me the pleasure, will be able to lose their way on the roads of Captains' Island. How sad it is to realise you aren't wanted by anyone.'

'Oh, come on, come on, our dear...' Captain Valentine paused for a second, and continued, 'dear Lighthouse Keeper.'

From the bottom of their hearts all the captains congratulated the Lighthouse Keeper who, truth to tell, was simply radiating happiness.

'And what on earth are we going to do with all these?' said Captain Valentine, with a contemptuous wave at the pirates.

'Mmm, yes... Generally speaking, to do things properly we ought to hang them from the yardarm,' drawled Captain Doitright with some doubt in his voice.

'Fodder for the sharks!' said Admiral Columbus haughtily.

'We'll reform! We'll be good,' wailed the pirates in a discordant chorus.

Chieftain Gina, making an insuperable effort, smiled for the first

time in her life. The smile turned out grudging, servile, sort of twisted to one side.

'All the same, what are we to do with them?' muttered Captain Nils with a frown. 'We can scarcely leave them here, on the island.'

'What if we set them on course for... Never-Never Land?' suggested Captain Valentine pensively, unhurriedly filling his old pipe with tobacco.

'How do you mean?' asked Captain Jean in surprise. 'Explain, old pal, what you have in mind.'

'Send them to Never-Never Land on the painted ship,' added Captain Valentine pointing to the ancient, faded painting on the tavern wall.

In the bluish circles of tobacco smoke the ship seemed to come to life and bob up and down on the faded painted waves.

'Oh la la! Terrific idea!' exclaimed Captain Jean.

'That's the route for them,' yelled Captain Doitright, banging his fist on the table.

All the captains took to the notion. It was probably the best solution. The next day the captains got down to business. With all precautions they took down the painted ship. To tell you truly, they were afraid to touch it fearing lest the dilapidated old ship would crumble to dust at any minute.

The painted ship was launched into the water by all the rules of the maritime craft. It slid down the slip with a scraping noise and, cleaving the blue watery glass of the sea, bobbed on the waves. The rays of the sinking sun cast a glow upon the ship, piercing the rotting sails and peeping through chinks in the planking and between the black ribbing of the ship's frame.

'Shiver my timbers! It's the Flying Dutchman!' cried old Admiral Columbus, raising his arm as if to protect himself from the terrible apparition.

'Come, come, Admiral,' said Captain Valentine with a smile, 'enough of those gloomy thoughts. You mustn't forget: a fairy tale is a fairy tale.'

Black Pussy, purring ingratiatingly, sidled up to the Squirrel.

'Squirrel, my beauty,' lisped the Cat in syrupy tones, not knowing exactly how to worm her way into the Squirrel's favours, 'take me on as your maidservant. I can comb your furry tail with my claws. Maybe you have something for me to wash or iron?'

'I am a sailor,' proudly exclaimed the Squirrel with a toss of his head. 'And sailors don't have maidservants.'

'Swallow, my dear,' cried Pussy, dashing over to the bird. 'If you like, I can be nanny to your babies. I certainly wouldn't ... I certainly wouldn't let them out of my sight. I'll teach them to catch...'

'Catch what? Little birds?' asked Swallow mockingly.

'Yes, yes, little birds!' echoed Black Pussy happily. Then she realised, what a great clanger she had dropped and fell silent with a dejected look.

Seizing his chance, One-Eye gave her a good kick in the side with the toe of his boot. Even pirates despise traitors.

With great reluctance the pirates boarded the ship.

'Never mind, we'll have our fun yet,' hissed Gina. 'We'll run into someone and plunder them.'

'You're sailing to Never-Never Land. So you won't be meeting anyone at all,' cried Captain Jean.

'Just you wait, we'll be back,' shouted Shorty in savage fury, shaking his square fist at the captains.

'No one ever returns from Never-Never Land,' said Captain Valentine with a shake of his head.

The setting sun blinded the captains for an instant. And immediately the painted ship with all the pirates disappeared from view. For it is impossible to follow the path of a ship as it sails off to Never-Never Land.

Captain Valentine gently took the arm of Christopher Columbus, surprised at how thin and fragile was the old Admiral's arm under his camisole. Unhurriedly he led him up the stone-paved road to where the patterned lamp shone cosily above the tavern entrance.

'Watch your step, Admiral,' warned Captain Valentine solicitously.

'Carramba. Accursed pirates!' snorted the old Admiral, having difficulty with the steps. 'I hope I can take a breather now for half a century or so.'

'I hope so too,' laughed Captain Valentine. 'Courage, Admiral, just a few more steps and we're home. Lean on my arm.'

'I must say, Captain, you're a dashed good sailing man and a fellow of impeccable virtue,' said Admiral Columbus in his somewhat highflown way.

Captain Valentine would have liked to have laughed it off, but Admiral Columbus for some reason gave a deep sigh and sadly stared at him with his wise eyes quite transparent with age.

'Thank you,' said Captain Valentine gravely. 'It is a great honour for any sailor to hear such words from Admiral Christopher Columbus.'

The grey, clumsy moths, flying towards the lamplight, overtook them as they moved in the same direction. They were peevishly chattering away in the twilight, pouring scorn upon the gaudy butterflies who were still sleepily flitting above the palm tree tops.

'They can never settle down in time!'

'No conscience at all!'

'Just look how gaudy they are — horrible!'

'It's our time now.'

'The lamps, candles and lanterns have already been lit. Let us circle and circle around the glow.'

So you see, life in the fairy-tale land had again taken its normal course.

Meanwhile, far away in the big city on a real river Swallow Two Spots flew in through the open window of Alex the Magician.

Tired out from the hard journey, the Swallow could hardly catch his breath as he perched on the telephone on the desk and wearily folded his streamlined wings.

'Oh, my dear Swallow, give me all the details, I beg of you, leave nothing out,' exclaimed the magician impatiently.

Vaska the Cat had also lazily arched his back and jumped on to the back of the settee, settling down, his green eyes gazing into space.

Even the genie just for the occasion had crawled out of his thermos flask. He was now sitting cross-legged in the darkest corner.

'It wouldn't surprise me in the slightest if those captains, those upstarts and know-alls have made their usual hash of everything,' he mumbled with a contemptuous curl of his lips.

Trying not to leave anything out, the Swallow told them of how the pirates had seized *Dream*. Then he recounted proudly the bravery of Captain Valentine and his friends.

'So that was why pirate Gina and Black Pussy had not wanted to make my acquaintance. I see now...' said Alex deep in thought. 'I might have smelt a rat.'

'Well, just compare Murka the Cat from our backyard to that Black moggy,' snorted Vaska the Cat haughtily and darkly. It was his view that Murka was perfection herself, and he could not bear to hear other cats praised or even simply mentioned.

'Good gracious. There can be no comparison,' exclaimed the Swallow warmly. 'Your Murka is so nice and charming. What's more, she has never chased birds since I made her acquaintance.'

Vaska the Cat turned away with proper indifference, though everyone could see he was pleased to hear that. His eyes seemed to be filled to the brim with transparent gold.

'They should have tipped the pirates into the nearest bottomless pit, and that'd be the end of it,' snorted the genie. 'That's what I'd have done in their place.'

'Oh, how tired I am,' sighed Swallow Two Spots, preening his feathers with his beak. 'First Fairy Tale Ocean, then another ocean... 'I'll go and take a peek at my children, have a little rest and fly on to

that boy who painted me, to that little Valentine. He's the one who made *Dream,* after all; and I think he'd like to know something of the adventures of his little boat.'

'He certainly would, I'm sure of that, he'd love to have some news,' Alex echoed absently. He was plunged deep in thought.

'Now what do you think,' he said, 'should I write down all this utterly incredible and amazing story? I reckon it is well worthy of it. I think many children would find the story of Captains' Island interesting.'

'Yes, it's probably worthwhile, why on earth not?' ventured Vaska the Cat lazily. To tell you the truth, he was simply over the moon about the idea. The vain cat was very tempted by the idea of ending up in a fairy tale.

'You're wasting your time, O Master,' said the genie, reproachfully shaking his great head. He gave a broad yawn, letting out of his mouth a cloud of black smoke with dull sparks.

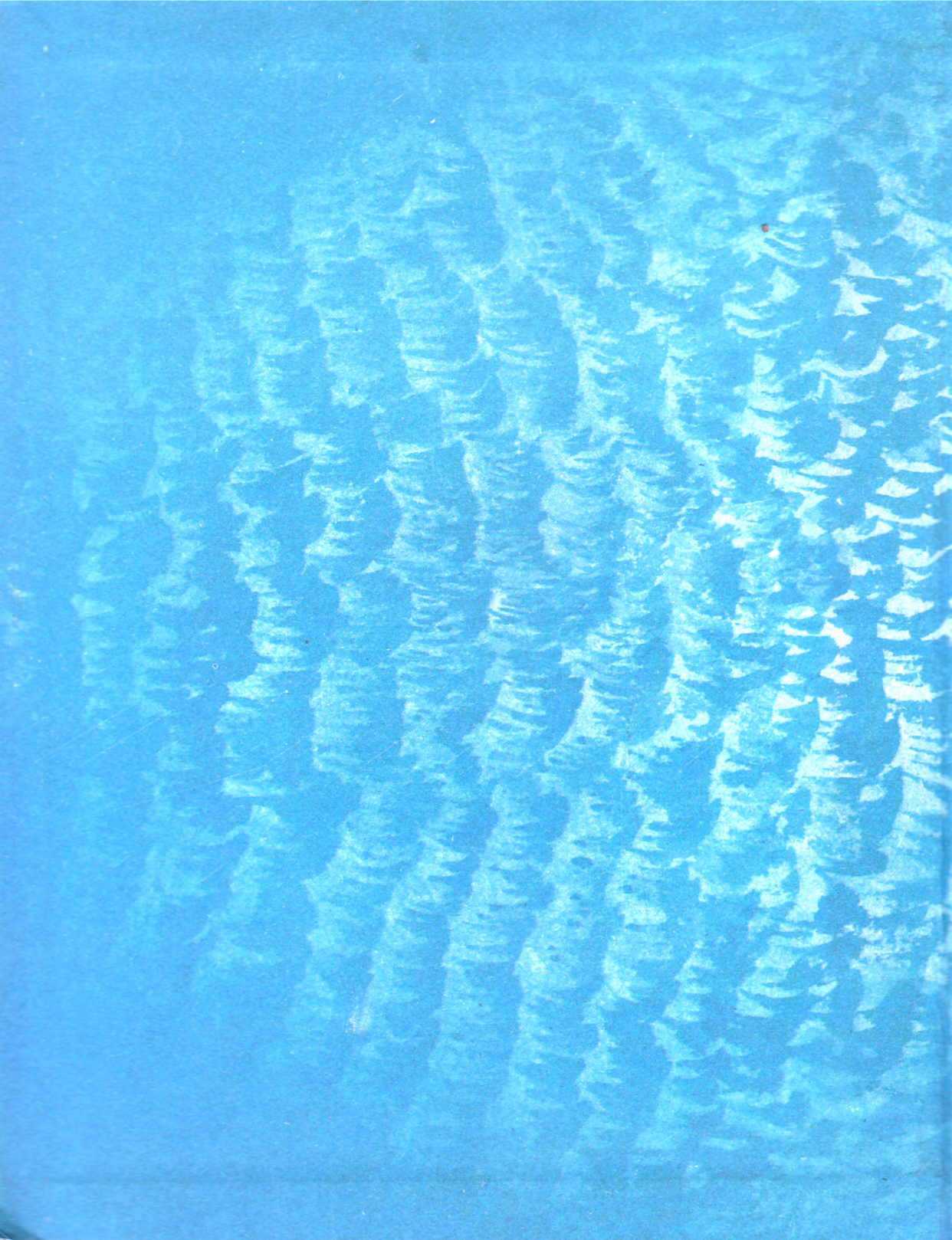
'You're wrong there,' said the magician. 'I'll invite an artist, a wonderful artist, and he'll paint your portrait. Now what do you say to that?'

The genie jumped to his feet abruptly, without thinking, and banged his crown on the ceiling, making the crystal pendants on the chandelier tremble and tinkle as usual.

'Marvelous idea, O Master, excellent idea!' he roared in delight. 'Let him paint my portrait. They usually paint some pitiful freaks, not honest-to-goodness genies, some wretched dwarfs who aren't a patch on wonderful real-life genies.'

Now shh...

Alex the Magician has sat down at the desk and set to work.



Raduga Publishers
Moscow

ISBN 5-05-000673-2